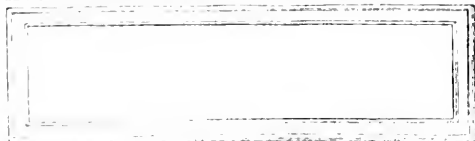
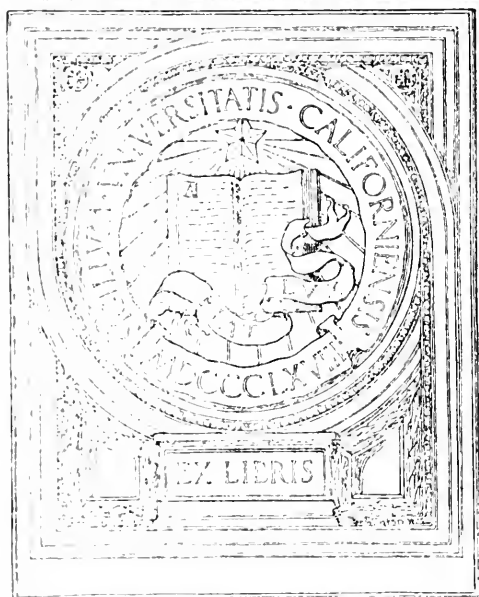




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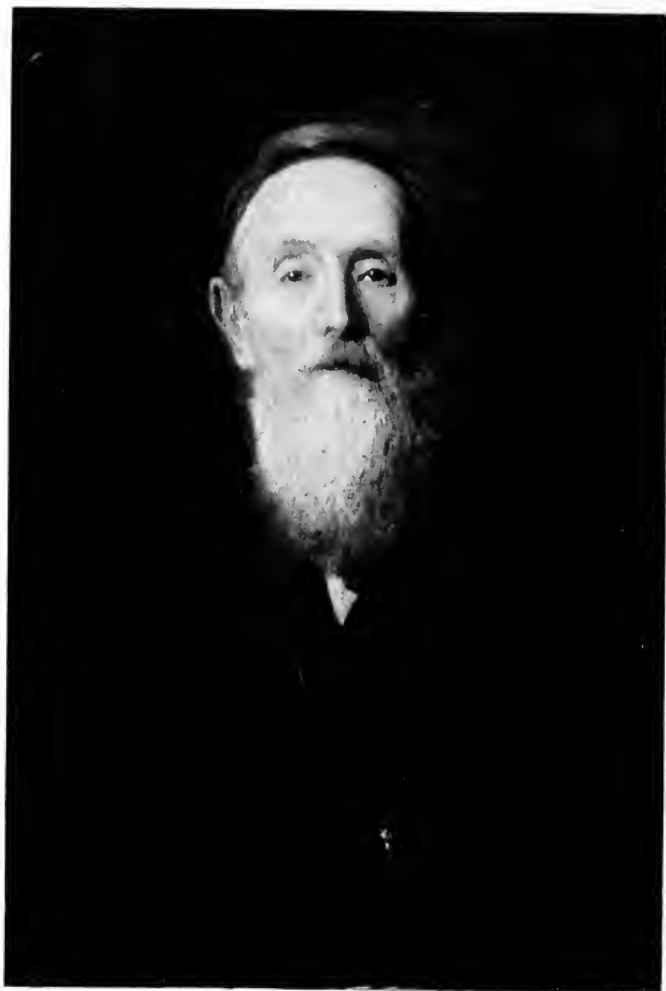
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From a painting by George Spencer Watson
Yours truly,
Wm Burt.

A GREAT LABOUR LEADER

BEING A LIFE OF THE
RIGHT HON. THOMAS BURT, M.P.

BY
AARON WATSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
FRED MADDISON, M.P.

LONDON
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HARDING

THIS BOOK
IS INSCRIBED TO MY FRIENDS
THE MINERS OF NORTHUMBERLAND,
WHO HAVE DONE THEMSELVES
EVERLASTING HONOUR
BY
THEIR DEVOTION TO THOMAS BURT.
A. W.

383707



PREFACE

WHEN addressing the boys of Trinity College School, at Port Hope, in Canada, a few weeks since, Earl Grey, the Governor-General, said : " The finest gentleman I ever knew was a working miner in England, whose gentleness, absolute fairness, instinctive horror of anything underhand or mean, or anything that was not the strictest fair-play, gave him a character that enabled him to rise to the position of Privy Councillor."

It is the life of this working miner that, as to its main facts, is narrated in these pages. It has been difficult to bring the material together. Most public men, I believe, keep some sort of record of themselves, however fragmentary. Mr. Burt appears to have supposed that no such record would ever be required. The idea of a biography of himself has been far from his mind at all times. He has kept no scrapbooks, no cuttings from newspapers, no reports of his speeches. He has said, indeed, " I have forgotten all the speeches I ever delivered. It is more satisfactory that one's audiences should remember them."

Many of Mr. Burt's speeches have been very well remembered, and I have made large use of them in these pages. Wherever I could, I have made him speak for himself. Few men speak better—hardly any that I know of ; and therefore I have not aimed so much at explaining him as at giving his explanation of himself in his own words.

The writing of his life has been a delightful task. The further it was proceeded with the more important and the more entirely worthy of such record the subject of it seemed to become. I have known Mr. Burt since he was first a candidate for Parliament—that is for between thirty and forty years—and I have “loved him on this side of idolatry” as much as any man could; and yet the writing of his life has enlarged my appreciation of his originality of mind, his high character, and his public usefulness.

But this book is not a panegyric. It is, I trust, a simple, honest narration, in temper as tolerant as his own, though that is scarcely possible, and with no pretensions beyond that of telling a story in such manner as may do some sort of justice, however inadequate, to its subject.

I should like to have said more about Mr. Burt's friends, colleagues, and helpers; but his own life ran away with me. Now that the book is finished I feel that I could write all round its chapters about those whom he knows, and that I know. That story would justify to the full what Charles Reade says, that, “Not a day passes over the earth but men and women of no note do great deeds, speak great words, and suffer noble sorrows.”

However, what is done is done, and is now offered to the reader as the story of a brave and strenuous life, and also as a tribute to a man whose modesty will reprove me for calling him great.

AARON WATSON.

January, 1908.

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INTRODUCTION

NOTHING could be more useful and appropriate than to have the story of the life and work of Mr. Thomas Burt told at this juncture in our industrial history. It is worth telling for its own sake, and it needs to be known in the interests of the younger generation. In spite of the enormous educational strides which have been made during the last half-century, the near past is a closed book to tens of thousands of the men in our trade unions and political organisations. They live in the present alone. It is, therefore, an advantage that they should be made acquainted with one of the builders of modern Trade Unionism whilst he is still with us, actively engaged in the same great cause to which he devoted himself when a young man. He has grown with the times, and is to-day as receptive as ever to truth, no matter from what quarter it may come.

As these pages testify, Mr. Burt's career as a public man can be presented in such a way as to do him some degree of justice. We follow with profit the tale of his early struggles with adversity, of his eagerness to gain knowledge, of his passionate love of fair-play. His association with the great men of his day, and the honour paid to him by friends and foes alike, enable us to get some reliable estimate of his place in the history of our generation. These things are comparatively easy, but not so the task of putting into words one's feelings about the man himself. And yet Mr. Burt's

personality is everything. It is the key to his whole work. Perhaps the dominating characteristic is his gentleness. To this is naturally allied a supreme desire to be just to his opponents, and a shrinking from the use of the harsh word. Such qualities may easily be mistaken for weakness, but they are really the sources of Mr. Burt's strength. To be quite candid, however, some of us are inclined to regret that he has not more of the fighter in him. He sometimes seems to pay too dear a price for the peaceful atmosphere in which he usually manages to live. But such criticism is futile. If we had our way we should lose our Thomas Burt altogether. What he has done is what he is, and by no other process could we have the unique figure which is the subject of this book.

Always sweetly reasonable as Mr. Burt is, he is a man of deep convictions, maintained through long years with a quiet steadfastness only possible to one of strong character. Men of a different mould, in whose veins the blood courses faster, have often been made stronger in action by contact with him. To have the approval of Mr. Burt is not only evidence of the wisdom or righteousness of your cause, but an inspiration to renewed effort. He is far more than a mere "safe" leader—often a convenient term to disguise a calculating opportunist. Such a one would not have braved the fury of a howling mob in the Newcastle Town Hall during the Boer War as Mr. Burt did. At supreme moments like that men are tested, and on such occasions the enduring qualities which stamp his individuality come into full play. Mr. Burt has this reserve power to an extent denied to many men of more apparent energy.

The people have reason to be proud of faithful sons like Thomas Burt. Demagogues will always abound, pandering to passion and appealing to prejudice. Mr. Burt's life is a standing rebuke to these pests of the Labour movement. A true product of the democracy, he has retained the simplicity of the Northumberland pitman even down to his dialect, and in both the spoken and the written word he possesses that gift of directness so loved of the common people.

Success has not spoiled him ; his disappointments have not soured him. As a politician, he began as a Radical on the broad platform of citizenship, not class, and he stands on that stable foundation to-day. His outlook is a wide one. All the good causes—Trade Unionism, Labour Co-partnership, Temperance, and the rest of them—have in him a devoted champion. To him freedom is the mainspring of human progress ; he is everywhere and always the foe of tyranny and cruelty. From the ranks of the working classes have sprung many notable leaders, but, for personal character, deep insight, sound judgment, and patient continuance in well-doing, none stand higher than Thomas Burt.

F. MADDISON.

I

PARENTS, BIRTH, AND CHILDHOOD



CHAPTER I

PARENTS, BIRTH, AND CHILDHOOD

IF, some day, a poet should write the Epic of Labour he might find his protagonist in the subject of this biography. The life of Thomas Burt covers nearly the whole of that great period during which the working man, and especially the working man of the coal-fields, has emerged from a condition resembling serfdom to one in which he deals with his employer on terms approaching equality. Sixty years ago he might be, and indeed was, sent to prison for taking part in a strike, or for encouraging others to take part, or, as will be seen from some of the particulars which follow, for being more than commonly intelligent, and therefore more than commonly liable to the suspicion of being a "firebrand." He may now be found on the magisterial bench, in positions of trust under the Government, on both sides of the House of Commons, in the Cabinet, and on the Privy Council.

Mr. Burt was the first actual working man returned to Parliament. There are others for whom that honour has been claimed. The late Sir George Elliott had worked in the coal-pit in his early days, and he was a member of Parliament some years before Mr. Burt; but Sir George Elliott was then a man of great wealth, and was at the head of many extensive commercial and industrial undertakings. He had spent what was in those days looked upon as a large fortune in forwarding the interests of his political party. Alexander MacDonald entered Parliament at the same time as Mr. Burt; but he, also, was a man who had

prospered in business, though to the last he honourably and steadfastly identified himself with the class from which he had sprung, continuing to be one of the leaders of trade unionism, and one of its chief spokesmen in the House of Commons. Mr. Burt was returned almost solely by workmen as a workman's member, at a time when he had not long left the pit, and was the ill-paid and hard-worked secretary of a miners' organisation. The sending to Westminster of the first direct representative of labour was generally recognised as the commencement of a new political era, and this, in truth, it proved to be.

The birth of the coal-hewer who was to become one of the most honoured members of the Mother of Parliaments, an occupant of the Treasury Bench, and a Privy Councillor, almost coincided with Queen Victoria's accession to the throne. It occurred at a small colliery village called Murton Row, in Northumberland, on the 12th of November, 1837. The village was one which seemed to have drifted away from its moorings. There was no coal-pit in the immediate neighbourhood, as there is in the vicinity of all other pit villages. There was, however, a colliery waggon-way running in front of the cottages, which was made the children's playground, and through this the lads became acquainted, in their very earliest years, with the danger as well as the grimness of the calling which they were in almost all instances destined to follow.

The colliery village is usually one "long, unlovely street," with a row of unprepossessing brick and tiled cottages on either side, the roofs in the rear going down in a curved slope to little more than the height of the water-butts which are an unvarying feature of dwellings of this description. The amount of house accommodation in villages of the old style was, and still is, grotesquely limited. In the most favourable cases there was one room for all the main household purposes. It was bedroom, sitting-room, kitchen, and bath-room. The long slope of the rearward portion of the roof was accounted for by an extension in the nature of a scullery. A ladder of some sort—never a set of stairs—led

up to an attic that could be used as a sleeping-room if the family grew numerous.

Murton Row resembled other colliery villages, except in respect of its size. It was unusually small. There were about eighteen cottages altogether, all of the single-roomed type. The house in which Peter Burt lived, and in which Thomas Burt was born, had no advantages over the others. Four children came into the world, two of them soon to leave it again, in the ordinary single room. A miner might be thrifty and self-denying to the point of miserliness; but he could not by foregoing other comforts obtain possession of a cottage any better than those occupied by his neighbours. There were no better cottages to be had. It is amazing to consider that a moral and, to a large extent, a pious population should for one generation after another have been brought up under these conditions; and still more amazing that the owners of the coal-mines should have continued to think that this was all that was necessary to be done for the housing of those to whose labour they mainly owed their wealth.

My friend Mr. Robert Jobling, the accomplished artist who has made the accompanying sketch of Murton Row as it is to-day, says that he found there "a little colony of pit-workers' cottages, facing a line of railway that runs through to Percy Main from the Backworth direction. The inhabitants were much interested in my mission, and ready to help with all kinds of information, useless and otherwise, as to the particular house I was in quest of, until I began to see that each was eager to believe that it was his own particular cottage that had the honour of being the birthplace of 'Tommy Burt,' as they affectionately called the member for Morpeth. I had reason to believe that a group of them, at a little distance from where I was working, were betting on the subject. I was rather glad to find that the consensus of opinion resolved itself into 'the last house in the row, or the one next to it.' I decided on the one next to it when I learned that some years ago it had been visited by Mr. Burt and his daughter. I give both in the

sketch. The one with the figure at the door is the most probable." It is, I may add, the actual birthplace.

We have Wesley's fervid testimony to the beauty of the Tyne valley in his own day; but his eulogy can even then hardly have applied to that portion of it which was nearest to Murton Row. In front of the cottages in one of which Thomas Burt was born the waggon-way brought down the produce of the important Cramlington Collieries, to be shipped at Percy Main and thereabouts, where there is still a typical colliery village, almost untouched, though it is no longer inhabited by miners, and has been almost absorbed in the growing town of North Shields. Murton Row is about a couple of miles distant from Percy Main, now a more important coal-shipping centre than ever before in its history. The immediately surrounding landscape, as one sees it to-day, is destitute of every sort of charm, except where the mouth of the Tyne widens into a noble harbour just before the river joins the sea. Inland, the country slopes up to a height crowned by a clump of birch-trees and an old windmill, and then dips down again to the broad level of the Northumberland coal-field. The spectacle is less diversified by trees, though there are spaces of woodland here and there, with the spires of churches visible above them, than by colliery buildings and their accompanying villages, the winding-house dominating everything but the tall lumber of the shaft-headings, each with its two wheels fanning the air in opposite directions, as if they were weaving some deft web against the sky.

The Burts possibly, even probably, came into England over the Scottish border. There is a family tradition to that effect; vague, with nothing to support it but its age; only, however, to be accounted for by supposing it to have some foundation in fact. What is known certainly is that the Burts were coal-miners in Northumberland from father to son for so long as their history is known. Peter Burt, the father of the subject of this biography, was, however, born on the south side of the Tyne, at Hebburn, now noted for its shipbuilding yards and engineering shops as well as for its



From a Drawing by

THOMAS BURT'S BIRTHPLACE.

[Robert Goble.]

To face page 6.

exportation of coal. The year of his birth was 1810. There was a family of five brothers and two sisters. All the brothers worked in or about the pits, and, in spite of the long hours of work and the hardness of the times, they all lived to be old men. They were honest, industrious, and temperate, and healthy, vigorous, and skilful workers. Peter Burt lived to see his son returned to the House of Commons, and even to witness a part of his Parliamentary success. I remember him as a thin, bright, fresh-complexioned old man, very active both of mind and body, living with his son at the miners' offices at Newcastle in the middle seventies.

There were strong Primitive Methodist influences in the family. Primitive Methodism was not quite so old as Peter Burt himself. It dates, as an organised religious body, from 1811. But it was then rapidly evangelising the pit villages. It had the field almost to itself. There was no keen competition of churches in those days for the glory of carrying light into the dark places of the pitman's life. John Wesley found the pitmen in what he considered to be a condition of heathenism. They had no religious teachers. Their children ran wild. When they entered the neighbouring centres of population they were stared at as strange, wild beings. Then came the Primitive Methodists, full of energy and hope. Peter Burt and one of his brothers became local preachers. Another brother became a class-leader—an office even more responsible than that of the preacher, seeing that it includes much individual exhortation and advice.

Peter Burt was the least robust of all the five brothers. He was injured in the back in early manhood, and he never wholly overcame the effects of that accident. He was a hearty worker, nevertheless, with one striking peculiarity. He never remained long in the same pit. This was not because of differences with his employers; or it was seldom on that account. It was because he had the instinct which compels some men to keep moving. His removals took place at intervals of about three years, sometimes less. They were never over long distances. Probably they were prompted by a feeling of monotony rather than by a spirit

of adventure. From Northumberland to Durham, or Durham to Northumberland, was their widest extent ; but generally it was only from colliery to colliery in the same county.

When Peter Burt got married, as he did at a fairly early age, it was to the daughter of Thomas Weatherburn, the engineman at Cowpen Colliery, near Blyth, in Northumberland. The Weatherburns were as notable a family as the Burts. "They were steady, industrious, truth-loving, truth-speaking folks," says Thomas Burt. In an age when almost all persons of their class signed their names with a cross, they could all read, write, and do simple arithmetic. They had been small farmers in Northumberland for many generations, but for some reason, perhaps because of landlord pressure, they betook themselves to the pits. All the sons of Thomas Weatherburn became enginemen, and one of his brothers had the distinction of being a personal friend of George Stephenson, the acquaintance having begun when Stephenson was at Killingworth Colliery, three miles to the west of where Thomas Burt was born. The old friendship led to this particular Weatherburn being invited to take some place of responsibility in the South of England, where his descendants are still engaged on railways. It was a happy union, that of Peter Burt and Rebecca Weatherburn, enduring, through many privations, until Mrs. Burt was fifty years of age, and coming to an end amid restfulness and ease and a beautiful family affection. "No child born in the purple could have had better or more loving parents than mine," says the son who, in later years, so amply repaid this love by his own filial devotion.

The wandering instinct in the father had the effect of enabling the boy to form a greater variety of early impressions than could have been the case within the restricted area of one colliery village. The first movement was from Murton Row to Whitley, now called Whitley Bay. Coals were then shipped on a small scale from the neighbouring village of Cullercoats. Whitley, now a not inconsiderable

watering-place, is seated on a long line of cliffs and sand dunes facing the North Sea. When the cliffs come to an end there is a broad, shining semicircle of sands leading away to the little island of St. Mary, with its tall lighthouse, its couple of cottages, and its seaweed-covered rocks. On fine days the Cheviot Hills are in sight, and much nearer at hand, may be—

Marked amid her trees the hall
Of lofty Seaton Delaval.

A more bracing place in which to spend a childhood there could scarcely be ; but before long it became necessary to leave Whitley because there had been an explosion in the pit, with what results of loss of life Mr. Burt does not remember. Peter Burt, at any rate, escaped death or injury, though the closing of the pit meant want of employment to him, and also a fresh migration.

It was at Whitley that Thomas Burt saw soldiers for the first time. He has a dim recollection of a troop of cavalry trotting past the door of the little cottage. Those were the days of Chartism. The movement was, in fact, at its height. Many of the young miners, both in Northumberland and Durham, had joined it on the physical force side. They were miserably poor, for trade was depressed ; when the pits were open they worked long hours for low wages ; their grievances were such as might justly be described as oppressions ; and so, believing that they could mend matters by making a show of violence, and also being desperate, they armed themselves with pikes, muskets, old blunderbusses, and whatever likely or unlikely weapons they could procure. They would have been as defenceless against well-armed troops as were the peasants in Monmouth's rebellion. However, there was never any serious encounter with authority. The men of Winlaton—"Crowley's Crew" they were called—who were anchor and chain smiths, went into a state of panic, and filled a deep well with pikes, when the soldiers suddenly appeared in their sheltered valley. Greatly more cautious than Monmouth's peasants, they had no disposition to stand

up with pikes against the muzzles of carbines. If troops of soldiers here and there did not instil respect for law, they at least inspired wholesome apprehensions as to the possible consequences of disorder. So the soldiers were marched about from one town or village to another, and thus it was that Thomas Burt caught his early glimpse of the red-coats.

This, let it be noted, was a wonderfully early awakening of the powers of observation and recollection. The small observer was not yet three years of age. His life from his third to his seventh year was spent at Seghill, in a part now known as Blake Town, from association with the family of the great Admiral. This was then one of the largest colliery villages in Northumberland, and probably the most characteristic of all. If a story was told against a Northumberland pitman Seghill was certain to be pitched on as the place to which he belonged. It is related of "the pitman's happy times," a brief period following the Franco-German War, that a Seghill man purchased a marble timepiece, and that on being asked by the vendor some time afterwards how the clock was getting on he replied that she was getting on canny, adding, "Ye wadna knaw her the noo. I've gien her a bonny coat o' green paint."

All round Seghill the country is flat, dull, with little wood or water ; but Thomas Burt found it full of unending charm and interest. He speaks of his childhood as seeming, in the retrospect, to have been a very happy one. His was a healthy childhood, at least. Though he has never been more than a middle-sized man, he was more than an average-sized boy, and was active and vigorous withal, adept in all such games of childhood as had made their way to the colliery villages. Bathing in a muddy little burn, or brook, was one of his recreations, and he became thus early a lover of nature, rambling through the fields and the country lanes, and finding himself enraptured by the singing of birds. Often his rambles were solitary ; but often, again, he had an agreeable and welcome companion. This was no other than his grandfather Weatherburn, retired from work some years before, and with all his time on his hands. Thomas

Weatherburn was then seventy years of age, but he was still bright and vigorous, and was fond of long walks in the country, on many of which he would take his little grandson. He is remembered by his companion of those days as a man of genial aspect, of unfailing kindness and good nature ; quiet, patient, self-possessed, with a great liking for children, and ingenious in the invention of means to interest and amuse them.

Thus, and in such company, whilst still under seven years of age, Thomas Burt became familiar with all the country for miles round about ; familiar also with the shoreward features of the sea. He was an inquisitive child, and cannonaded his grandfather with questions. The old colliery engineman was not always able to answer the queries of this inquisitive boy. "One needs to be well-informed to travel with that child," he said to the lad's mother. "He wants to know the far end of everything."

Of the companionship of his father the lad had very little at that time. Peter Burt's hours in the pit were so long that he seldom saw daylight except at the week-end. It is not without the aid of a rather powerful imagination that the coal-miner of to-day can picture to himself the conditions of life in the pit at about the time when Thomas Burt was born. The working hours were from fourteen to eighteen a day, according to the state of trade. The coal-hewer, it was alleged by the employer, could earn 3s. 8d. a day, but the men placed their earnings at considerably less. The mines were more dangerous than now, for they were not inspected ; and there was generally what would in these days be treated as criminal carelessness concerning matters involving loss of life and limb. What many a miner must have felt, if less imaginatively, Joseph Skipsey, the pitman poet, born near Mr. Burt, at Percy Main, has put in touching and vivid verse—

"Get up !" the caller calls, "get up !"
And in the dead of night,
To win the bairns their bite and sup,
I rise a weary wight.

My flannel dudden donn'd, thrice o'er
My "birds" are kissed, and then
I with a whistle shut the door
I may not ope again.

Peter Burt worked his hardest under these harsh circumstances, denying himself all the indulgences that were then common. Alone among his friends and relatives he had joined the Order of Rechabites, and thus laid himself open to suspicion and ridicule ; for teetotalism was then extremely unpopular, and was even supposed to have some ill purpose behind it. But for the small family this abstinence was a most beneficial arrangement. Even in the hardest of times Thomas Burt never knew what it was to be hungry. The style of living was spare and bare enough, but for appetites kept within moderation there was always sufficient to eat.

The father's great anxiety was to keep the boy away from the pit, the engine-house, and the waggon-way, on which children were not infrequently killed. It was defeated, as might be surmised, by the natural curiosity of childhood and its inapprehensiveness of danger. The lad was strictly enjoined never to go near the pit, but he confesses to a powerful and overpowering craving to break the commandment. The sight of engines fascinated him. Many a time when his father was hard at work at the face of the coal he would steal away to the engine-house. "I would stand an hour at a stretch," he says, "watching the wheels go round."

II

THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1844

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1844

IT was at Seghill that Thomas Burt's school-days began. He first went to a dame-school, of course. That was in those days the invariable beginning of education among the children of the poor. The dame in this instance was Mrs. Campbell, the wife of a pitman, who seems to have had rather less than the usual feeble equipment for the task she had undertaken. She appears simply to have taught the children their letters. There was no pretence of writing or of arithmetic.

And in her hand for sceptre, she does wield
Tway birchen sprays,

says Shenstone of the schoolmistress of his once popular poem. Young Thomas Burt's schoolmistress was armed with a tawse, which is a Scottish weapon for the quelling of childhood. It is by this instrument of discipline that she is best remembered by her former scholar. Being short-sighted, it was her habit to fling the tawse in the direction of any undisciplined sound. The leathern instrument had to be carried back to her by the child nearest to whom it fell, and as the scholar returning the tawse was the one usually punished, it followed that the real offender got off scot-free in most instances. But it may have worked out all right on a system of averages, Mr. Burt is willing to allow.

These school experiences were only of brief duration. Indeed, the whole of the school-days of Thomas Burt would

not add up into a total of more than two years. Yet the parents were eager to secure as much education as they could for their son. From the dame-school they sent him to what has been called in one biographical work, either humorously or with strange absence of humour, "a more advanced seminary." This was a school kept by a Mr. Anderson, who was assisted by his two sons. Here the young scholar, at that time not, according to his own confession, more eager for learning than other children of his age, acquired the art of making straight strokes and pot-hooks, and began to read and write a little. What else he might have learned it is not now possible to know, for an event occurred which put an end to his school-days for some time to come. It is probable that Anderson was a capable schoolmaster for the young. Mr. Burt says that he was patient, painstaking, and kind, and that for his own part he made fair progress under him in reading and writing. The event which brought these school-days to a close was the memorable strike of 1844.

All the coal-pits in Northumberland and Durham were involved in this great struggle between employers and employed, described by Mr. Burt himself as "one of the severest and most prolonged industrial battles that ever occurred in England or elsewhere." It affected more than twenty thousand men and boys, and extended over a period of twenty-six weeks. There ensued such widespread suffering and privation as had not before been known among the miners of the North. The strike bred much heroism and self-sacrifice; and there can be no doubt that it sowed the seeds of emancipation, though its immediate result was defeat, disappointment, and a return to work on the slavish terms against which it had been a protest. How it came about deserves to be the subject of a digression.

The miners of the North were employed under a system which was known as "the yearly bond." It was a mode of engaging service such as still survives among farm servants in the hirings of the Statute Fairs. The bonds were drawn up without any consultation with the men. They contained terms that were simply to be subscribed to—usually by the

making of a cross. The mine-owners—or, as happened in many cases, the lessees of the mines—varied the terms as they chose, and the men had to accept them in sheer despair. When the time came for signing the yearly bond there were orgies in the pit villages, the employers not considering it unworthy of them to make the men drunk as a means of obtaining their signatures to terms that might otherwise have led to strikes. All this is faithfully described in Thomas Wilson's "The Pitman's Pay," one of the most admirable, picturesque, and strong, though possibly the most difficult, of all our dialect poems. Says Wilson :—

Just like wor maisters when wor bun.
 If men an' lads be very scant,
 They wheedle us with yel an' fun,
 And coax us into what they want.
 But mak yor mark ; then snuffs and sneers
 Soon stop yor gob an' lay yor braggin :
 When once your feet are i' the geers,
 Maw saul, they keep yor paunches naggin.

A new form of the yearly bond was enforced in 1843. It reduced wages, though there had been no fall in the London market, which then was the sole regulator of the price of coals. The men had many grievances besides this arbitrary reduction of their earnings. Under the new terms the best hewers could not earn more than 2s. 6d. to 2s. 10d. per day. If a man was absent from his work he had to pay a half-crown fine, so that another day's work went to pay for the day that went before it. On the other hand, the employers laid the pit idle whenever they liked, as, indeed, they do now, the members of the pitman's household, in every village, anxiously listening at night for the "buzzer" which will announce whether or not the pit is to resume work in the morning. At most, it was then possible for a hewer, the most highly paid class of miner, to earn about thirty shillings for eleven days' work, the "pays" being made fortnightly, and the pay-day being an idle, or, as it is called, a "baff" Saturday. And out of these scanty earnings, scarcely better than those

of the worst-paid agricultural labourer of the period, the miner had to provide his tools, the powder for blasting, candles to light him at his work, and something to secure the services of a doctor if he was sick at home or had been injured in the pit. Then there were constant fines. There was a regular and profitable sale of small coals; yet if a miner sent small coals out of the pit he was fined for it. Each tub was inspected at bank, and if there was more than the merest proportion of "small," the tub was not counted as part of the day's work, the miner losing the whole of what he should have been paid for hewing it. Sometimes a man would work all day and find that he had earned nothing by his labour. Mr. Burt's father, on one occasion, had seven tubs forfeited out of eight at one of the collieries at which he worked. The incident has been remembered because, painful as it must have been to him, he made it the subject of a humorous rhyme.

It must have been almost unimaginably difficult to be humorous under such circumstances, for this power of rejecting a man's work because it was not "clean" enough was often frightfully abused. There were many occasions on which it was exercised as a means of wreaking private malice, and it does not at all follow from the fine inflicted on Peter Burt that he had sent up seven tubs of "dirty" coal, or any "dirty" coal at all.

I am writing of a time that is happily long gone by, when the miner's calling was a cruel form of slavery, and when it usually happened that the whole of the week's wages had to be paid to the "tommy," or truck, shop, which was an appanage of the colliery. My description is an understatement of the case; yet I can understand that it may seem incredible. The fact that it has become so is a measure of the vast progress that has been made within a little more than sixty years, much of it owing to the subject of this biography, and the brave, sound-hearted, far-seeing men who have been his fellow-workers; much of it owing also, as one readily and gladly admits, to a change in the class of coalowner, to the general progress of enlightenment, to "purer manners, juster

laws," and to an unprecedented diffusion of the humanitarian spirit.

The changes made in the yearly bond of 1843 produced a crisis in the year following. The men demanded an advance of wages to the extent of three-halfpence a ton. More daring was the stipulation that they should be taken into consultation in regard to the terms of the yearly bond, the first assertion of the men's right to be regarded as parties to a bargain. The miners were under the leadership of a wise, moderate, and cautious man, still gratefully remembered in Northumberland and Durham. This was Martin Jude, who was opposed to a strike, not considering that a suitable time had arrived ; but who stood by the men, and helped and advised them, when it proved that their wrongs were such as they could no longer endure.

Jude's advice was followed as long as anything seemed likely to come of it. There was no eagerness for a strike, for there were no defensive resources. The "tommy" shops would close with the collieries. There could be no expectation of credit where the giving of it would mean financing the strikers against the employers. There were no co-operative societies as yet, with little saved-up balances to the name of each member. The union had no reserve funds, or next to none. A strike would be a most desperate expedient at the best ; and so methods of conciliation were resorted to, not without some measure of hope. On March 20, 1844, the men sent a letter to the owners asking them to appoint a deputation from their own body to receive a deputation from the Miners' Association. The employers absolutely ignored the request. There was no reply of any sort. Nor at any time during the long and cruel conflict that followed was there any recognition of the miners' organisation, or of the miner's right to be a party to a bargain where his own labour was the article to be bought and sold.

"The men felt insulted by this contempt," says the late Richard Fynes, the historian of the event, "and, goaded by the insolence of their employers, they resolved that the collieries in the two counties should cease working until their

differences were adjusted." The strike, they said, had been forced upon them by the unjust and shameful reduction made in their earnings in 1843. Strikes were not in those times what they are to-day. The law then openly sided with the employer, whatever his case might be. A few years earlier, Cuthbert Skipsey, the father of the poet, was deliberately shot down by a constable, at Percy Main, whilst he was endeavouring to restore order during a riot. On the other hand, a miner who, undesignedly, it is still believed, killed a coalowner during a labour quarrel, was hanged at Durham, encased in pitch, and then gibbeted at Jarrow Slake, the scene of the fatal encounter. It was already the nineteenth century; but men were hunted about from place to place by coalowners and magistrates whenever any strike occurred. The military were called in. The prisons were overcrowded. "To such an extent were the Gaol and House of Correction in Durham filled," says Mr. Fynes, speaking of the time when Cuthbert Skipsey was shot down, "that for fear of infection prisoners were removed to the stable and the stable-yards of the Bishop of Durham, where they were guarded by the Durham volunteers and special constables, and afterwards by the Royal Carmarthenshire Militia. Fresh seizures were made every day, till finally the number of men imprisoned in the Bishop's stables was 300."

In 1844 the men of both counties left their work in April; and then commenced a series of extraordinary scenes. Immediate steps were taken to fill the places left vacant. Men were brought from Wales and elsewhere, under much better terms than those which had been refused to the men on the spot. Mr. Burt remembers how the women, youths, and children, with tin pans, "blazers," and other improvised tinkling cymbals, rushed down to the waggonways every morning and night to greet the "blacklegs" with matin service and serenade. Then came the evictions. The coalowners of the North have a terrible weapon at their command in case of a strike which threatens to be prolonged. They are the proprietors of the cottages in which the pitmen live, and for these cottages no rents are paid, the cottage

being, in fact, a part of the fortnightly wages. Occupancy can therefore be terminated with the cessation of employment, and as there are no other houses to be obtained for miles round about, in most instances eviction means in Durham and Northumberland what it has always meant in Ireland, the throwing out of the people and their belongings on to the roadside spaces or into the village street.

In the strike of 1844 this work was done with a peculiar and brutal ruthlessness. The men employed to carry out evictions in the colliery villages are called "candyman," for the reason that they were originally recruited from the class which hawks sweetstuffs through the countryside ; but, of course, the candyman were not numerous enough for such a big job as was now required to be done. The slums of the large towns were hunted for reinforcements ; and if the orders had been to carry out a disagreeable piece of work with as much compassionateness as possible the instruments employed were ruthless men, such as could not possibly have obeyed their instructions. However, there is no reason to think that any compassionate instructions were given, the object in view being to break down the strike by the very roughest and readiest means available. The candyman were accompanied by bodies of police, armed with cutlasses and bludgeons. The yeomanry were called out as a further security that the work should be done, if not decently, at least according to orders, and with the utmost thoroughness. "The police," says Mr. Fynes, "swooped down when the husbands were away, and turned the families to the doors." There were, as was inevitable, cases of almost astounding callousness and brutality. A man named Henry Barrass, eighty years of age, and his wife, aged seventy-five, were turned out together into the rain and the night. Proceedings so pitiable as this were contrasted by exhibitions of rough and desperate humour. One man, renowned in his neighbourhood for a strength like that of a bull, and a courage which approached recklessness, heated a poker to white heat when he knew that he was about to be evicted

and then seated himself on a keg of gunpowder, singing songs and shouting defiance to the candymen.

Yet, for the most part, the evictions proceeded smoothly and quietly. It was their tremendous scale, rather than any incidents by which they were accompanied, that attracted national attention, and led to the condemnation of the employers in *Punch* and some of the most powerful newspapers. The men were grossly provoked on occasion. They saw windows and doors being broken to pieces in order that the meagre household goods in which they took pride, and which had been gathered together with much pain and self-denial, might be thrown out into the street by the candymen, often in a condition of wreck, and they turned away angry, but not revengeful.

Large, however, as was the area of strife, spreading nearly from end to end of two extensive counties, the miners in general were orderly and law-abiding. They formed camps in the fields and by the roadsides, building up their furniture into laager, as might have been said if the word had then come into use, and improvising such coverings from the weather as they could with the means at their command. Every colliery village, as Mr. Burt says, presented a picture sombre and pitiful. There was no possibility of finding house-accommodation for a twentieth part of those who had been evicted. The workhouses, too, were closed against the strikers and their families. "Starvation had to be endured," says Mr. Fynes grimly, and it was starvation extending over twenty-six weeks, during which no word of any sort could be obtained from the employers, and proposals of arbitration were treated as if they had not been made. "Such was the position of affairs," says one of those who both saw and endured that which he records. "The men houseless and homeless, hungry and careworn. Many, with wives and children pining for food which they could not get for them, were still convinced of the justice of the cause they had adopted, and still determined to fight for it."

But just as the cause might be, it was not at that time destined to prevail. He who was afterwards to lead the

miners out of this wilderness of hunger and serfdom into a land of reasonable plenty and greatly enlarged liberty was as yet only seven years of age, watching with large, fascinated eyes the working out of one of the tragedies of labour, among the incidents being the dribbling back to work of men compelled by their necessities to accept the old terms of employment. In the strike of 1844 the mine-owners won "hands down," merely by treating the men as if they did not exist, except when their furniture was to be cast out of the cottages. Of that ignoble sort of victory this was happily the last on the large scale. The great strike of 1844 was not without its uses. It told heavily in favour of the men in years that were then to come, and it bound them together by a tragic recollection.

There were, indeed, some immediate good results ; and there were also some very bad ones. When work was resumed, the Welshmen who had been brought into the pits were fallen upon and maltreated in many instances. And at Seaton Delaval there was the worst riot that had ever been known in Northumberland. Of the men who were suspected of being leaders in the strike none were taken back into the pits, and many had to endure great hardships before they again found employment. On the other hand, the sympathy of the press and the public had been aroused, and the Hon. "Tom" Duncombe took up the miners' cause in Parliament, and did some real service. The plea of Wilson, in "The Pitman's Pay" reached many hearts in London, and led to inquiry in regard to the causes of explosions. Thus Wilson wrote :—

Think on us, hinnies, if you please,
An it war but to show yor pity;
For a' the toils and tears it gi'es,
To warm the shins o' London city.
The fiery "blast" cuts short wor lives,
And steep's wor hyems in deep distress;
Meks widows o' wor canny wives,
And a' wor bairns makes fatherless.

III

SCHOOLING, AND BOYHOOD IN THE PIT



CHAPTER III

SCHOOLING, AND BOYHOOD IN THE PIT

THE great strike momentarily affected the Burt family, and shaped in wholly unforeseen ways the life of the subject of this book. Peter Burt and his family were among the evicted, as were all his brothers, and all his relatives of the Weatherburn family. There were many of these relatives grouped together at that time. "Near by us at Seghill lived my uncles and aunts, James and Hannah Waddle, and Cuthbert and Margaret Todd," says Mr. Burt. The aunts were the mother's elder sisters. "They were very fond of children, and having none of their own, made much of me." There was a friendly farmer, named Duxfield, living at the Avenue Head, Seaton Delaval. He offered Peter Burt and some of his relatives the use of a cottage which was part of the farm. So much of the furniture as the cottage would not hold could be stored away in granaries and barns. Thus there came to be three families huddled together in two rooms—the Burts, the Waddles, and the Weatherburns. It was in a place already familiar to the seven-year-old lad, for he and his grandfather had always been welcome there.

Under such cramped conditions of existence as these the love romance of Thomas Burt's life began; for one of the Weatherburn children was Mary, then eighteen or twenty months old. Her sturdy cousin Tom rocked her cradle, wheeled her about in a little home-made carriage, was companion and playmate, untiring alike in his care of her and his invention of games for her amusement. If this were a work of fiction it would be necessary at this point to so deal

with the plot that the "love interest" might be duly prolonged ; but as it is merely a plain and unpretending narrative of facts it may at once be said that the affectionate association which commenced at Seaton Delaval, in the year of the disastrous strike, has never for a moment been broken or interrupted, for the little Mary Weatherburn whom Thomas Burt wheeled about the country lanes, or down to the seashore, which was not many hundreds of yards away, is the wife who has so faithfully shared his trials and triumphs, who has wept and sorrowed with him on many a sad occasion, and on many another has been elated by the good he has accomplished, and the esteem in which he has ever been held.

The Avenue Head was within a stone's throw of the great hall which was designed by Sir John Vanbrugh for the "wild Delavals." It was one of those buildings which suggested the sarcastic epitaph :—

Lie on him heavy, earth, for he
Laid many a heavy load on thee.

This tall mansion, seated on high ground that slopes rather rapidly down to a pleasant valley and a quiet stream, looks proudly over its belt of trees to the North Sea, and is one of the sailor's landmarks. But it is now like the halls of Balclutha, which were so desolate that the wolf looked through the windows ; for the interior was long since destroyed by fire, and statues and marble columns are now nothing but a white dust. But the ruin is dignified and noble, and to a child's imagination may well have been awe-inspiring. The Avenue is still a fine road between two rows of magnificent trees, extending for some miles towards Newcastle, and in the other direction down to the sea. Below Delaval Hall, a little to the north, is Seaton Sluice, where there were bottle works, and where the "sluice," cut deep down through the cliffs to low-water level, would permit a small schooner to enter ; and there, sometimes, were such vessels to be seen, with their masts looking from



From a Drawing by

AT SEATON DELAVAL.

[Robert Fybeling.]

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a short distance as if they grew up out of the village green.

But for the unavoidable overcrowding at home, Seaton Delaval was a far from unromantic place to live in, and it must have seemed to a keenly observant boy to be quite a Paradise as compared with Seghill. Besides, there were rapturous delights. Farmer Duxfield had horses, and the boy was permitted to ride them to and from the plough. And here coffee with cream was a luxury tasted for the first time. It was like coming into a kingdom. Then there were the long rambles into the country ; and wanderings along the links—with their spear-like grasses tufted into clumps—that stretched away to the then diminutive port of Blyth ; and climbings among the rocks, covered with richly brown seaweed, at Seaton Sluice. It was a joyous existence, despite the extreme poverty of the home. And there was no schooling, for nobody could pay the schoolmaster during this hungry strike. All the day was for enjoyment. Thomas Burt was a boy whose education was being much neglected in the technical sense ; but he was educating himself already, drawing in knowledge at every pore, and by quite agreeable processes.

Of the estimation in which the father's character was held, not merely by his own class but by the class just above it—the tradesman class, to wit—there is one clear and convincing proof. A strike stops supplies. "Poor Trust is dead," as the familiar warning has it ; unless, that is to say, there is some one who is reputable enough to be accepted as guarantor for the subsequent liquidation of indebtedness. Peter Burt was, in the opinion of the tradesmen of the neighbourhood, one of those who could be thus trusted. When it became a question of how the wageless workers were to live he was one of those who offered to become legally responsible for all goods obtained by them during their strike. It was a remarkable undertaking. It meant years of grinding poverty to follow, however circumstances might improve ; and, as a matter of fact, circumstances never did improve so long as Peter Burt was able to wield a pick in a coal-mine. But the conditions were faithfully observed, and Peter Burt's responsibility

continued until the whole of the liabilities had been discharged.

In the little home at the Avenue Head there was scarcity, but no actual want. This was not because there were any savings to fall back upon. There was, indeed, nothing in hand ; as how could there be ? To make matters worse, the tradesman with whom the Burts had been accustomed to deal could not bear the strain put on his credit by the strike. He was among the first of those who went down. Here was a situation wholly unexpected and profoundly embarrassing, for the tradesman who has had one's ready money is the only one who is likely to give credit in times of adversity. Peter Burt had made himself responsible for his neighbours, but he was stranded himself. Then presented itself another strong proof of how far character will go in such circumstances. A miller and provision merchant near Blyth spontaneously offered credit till the strike was over. I take note of his name, which was Hodgson, of Hodgson's Mill, at Cowpen, for he was a man who deserves to be precisely remembered. His account had to be paid off in dribblets over many years ; but his complaint against Mrs. Burt was not that she had been too slack in her payments, but that she had inconvenienced herself and her family by paying him off too soon. However, the debt was a green sore whilst any portion of it remained, and there was a wholesome family festivity when the final instalment was paid.

Misfortune followed Peter Burt when the strike ended ; but I incline to think that it was rather a good day for his son, for it opened out a new world of experience to one who was not far from the time when he was himself to enter the mine. At the conclusion of every strike there are "sacrificed" men. They may not be sacrificed immediately, for that might renew the strike ; but ultimately they have to go, on one ground or another. There was no concealment of evil intention with regard to Peter Burt when he went back to the pit. He was plainly told that he was a marked man. Work was offered to him on condition that he took no more

part in the affairs of the miners' union, and these were conditions that he at once declined to accept. However, it was impossible for him to reject them in the long run. He could reject them, indeed, only on condition of starving his family. He might stand by the union, but there was no union pay. Looking the circumstances fairly in the face, counting the cost, to others, of his own independence, he declined the terms at first and then accepted them ; but this was only as a temporary expedient, and with a clear intention of disposing of himself otherwise. He had the wandering instinct, as has been said, and that perfect confidence of the good workman in himself which inspires him to take risks. When he had somewhat recovered from the disasters with which the strike had smitten his family he turned his face from Northumberland and went into Durham. There he found work at Elemore Colliery, where, long as were the hours of labour in the pit, he had, as there was no colliery cottage empty, to walk some distance backward and forward to his work every day.

Durham is a much more picturesque county than that portion of the Northumberland coal-field in which he had laboured hitherto ; but it was never quite to his mind. He was very far indeed from being the sort of man who seeks a soft place for his feet ; but the ground always began to burn under him after a while. One of the stopping-places in a desert in which there was no manna to speak of was Easington Lane, not far from the Yorkshire border, and at this place there presented itself a new trouble. Young Tom had his first illness. It was fever of some sort, and so virulent that it brought him very near to death. Of the Burt children there were only two left, the second being a younger son who lived just long enough to vote for his brother at the election which carried him into Parliament in 1874. But for such a favourable turn in the illness at Easington Lane as was not to be looked for, medical attendance being rather perfunctory in those days in the case of the poor, the Burt family and its honourable and heroic struggles would have passed into the mists which enshroud so many other examples of heroic labour and patient nobility of character.

But the lad pulled finely through ; and then came another interval of schooling. It was not a profitable experience. The schoolmaster was a certain Willie Richardson, who had been a pitman, and was a friend of Thomas Burt's father. He had absolutely no qualifications for the work to which he had appointed himself. He was like the governess in Byron's poem, who "by her teaching taught herself to spell." The Primitive Methodist Sunday School which the boy attended seems to have been more useful to him, and to have stirred some ambition to excel ; for there he appeared for the first and last time of his life in the character of reciter. It was a passage from the Bible that he declaimed : "The wilderness and the solitary places shall be glad," and the verses which follow. The recitation, as his father told him long afterwards, was far from being a failure—it brought much praise, indeed—and the reason why the experiment was never repeated might probably be found in the fact that it was followed by another of the periodical removals, this time to the Blue House, between Shotton and Haswell Collieries, the parental wanderings still being confined to the county of Durham.

This was the third removal in about a year. Mr. Burt remembers it in connection with a big snow-storm and a narrow escape that he then had. The winter of 1845 was particularly severe, the roads being blocked with snow for weeks on end. One day little Thomas Burt perseveringly fought his way through to the nearest farmhouse for the day's supply of milk ; but in returning homewards plumped up to the chin in a snowdrift, and got out he scarcely remembers how ; but he does remember that he was on the point of giving himself up for lost, as almost certainly would have been the case if there had been wind and drifting snow instead of cold, clear, calm weather.

There was a school at Haswell Colliery, about a mile from the Blue House, and there, the stern winter being past, the much-interrupted educational career was resumed, with disagreeable consequences and little profit. The schoolmaster, says Mr. Burt, was "a slightly built, red-haired, towsy-

headed, knock-kneed little man," who little dreamed that he had a pupil who would so effectively describe him more than sixty years afterwards. This small creature was a notable tyrant, and had quite a collection of instruments of torture, the virtues of each of these being tried in turn on the body of the little scholar who trudged to Haswell Colliery every day from the Blue House. There was a revolt of the boys on one occasion, Thomas Burt being the leader ; but this resulted in nothing but an extra allowance of punishment, and at last the especial victim of this pedagogic tyranny, the subject of this book, went home, with some fear in his heart and the resolution never to return. The Easington Lane School, at which he had formerly attended, was three miles away, and thither he betook himself once more, to the great satisfaction alike of master and scholars, for he was a general favourite, the only person who appeared to dislike him in those days being the harsh tyrant with the towsey head.

School-days, however, were shortly to come to an end again. Attendance at Easington Lane was continued over a few weeks only. Probably it was considered by the parents that a walk of six miles a day was too stern a discipline for a boy so young. At any rate, attendance at day-school was ended for good and all. "Except for a few hours at night-school, some years afterwards, I received no further assistance from living teachers," says Mr. Burt. A year and a half to two years, he considers, would cover the whole of his school-time ; and what he had learned was to read and write and do easy sums in arithmetic. He was no prodigy. He was not even an eager scholar, as he admits. Hunger for learning had not then awakened in him, as it did some years later, when it became a consuming fire. What he was most eager for in those early days was to grow up to ten years of age, when he could go down the pit, and by that means add to the scanty resources of the family.

This was not the plan of life sketched out for him by his parents. Whatever they may have had in view, they were certainly not disposed to let him commence pit-life too early. However, he was masterful on this subject, was stout against

all persuasion to remain at school a year or two longer, and finally obtained from his father a promise that work should be found for him when he had completed his tenth year—ten being the earliest age at which a boy could go to work underground. There was some idea, I believe, of “giving Tom a sickening of pit-work”; but as a matter of fact he never did sicken of it, and was a quite contented workman up to the day when his fellow-miners took him from the pit by electing him as the secretary of their trade union.

How pressing the boy had been that no time should be lost may be conjectured from the fact that he commenced work as “trapper-boy” at Haswell Colliery on November 13, 1847, the day after his tenth birthday. It happened that it was not necessary for him to walk to the pit as he had walked to the school, for the turn of the father had come to get one of the colliery houses; and so the boy’s working life began under less oppressive conditions than would otherwise have been the case. Oppressive enough was the life of a pit-boy under any conditions possible in those days. There was no legal limit to the hours during which boys might work. The day was considered to be one of twelve hours; but this was merely nominal, and the hours were not reckoned as now, from bank to bank, but were counted from the working place. Actually the hours were nearer thirteen than twelve. This, however, was a great improvement on the condition of things existing ten or twenty years earlier. Mr. Burt’s father commenced work at eight years of age, and toiled from fourteen to eighteen hours a day, according to the state of trade and the demand for coals. Even so late as 1840, as was revealed by the Royal Commission which sat in that year, children of both sexes, and of the tenderest age, were kept in the pits from sixteen to eighteen hours a day. The public conscience revolted against this, for it had been awakened by Mrs. Browning’s “The Cry of the Children,” and the earnest and useful philanthropy of Lord Ashley, the Earl of Shaftesbury of a later time.

When Thomas Burt went into the pit most things were changing for the better, but not rapidly, and as yet with no

steady determination towards more satisfactory conditions. The methods of working coal-pits were, however, in a hopeful state of transition, and it chanced that Haswell Colliery, where the boy of ten was to make his beginning, was one of those which gave the most kindly welcome to the era of improvement. Mr. Burt believes that it was the first Northern colliery in which cages were introduced. That was an almost inconceivably great and important step forward. The number of lives which the cage must have saved is not only past counting, but beyond all possible estimate. It almost exceeds belief in these days that men going down to their work, or leaving it after many hours of exhausting labour, had to cling to a chain or a rope, with nothing between them and the bottom of the pit if they should chance to slip, or to fall, or to faint ; yet this was a condition of things that was general when Thomas Burt became a collier lad. Life was even more cheap at the pits than on the high seas in the days of coffin ships. Happily, the proprietors of Haswell Colliery were more enlightened and more humane than most other colliery owners, and the lad who was now entering the pit for the first time had, therefore, something more of a chance of living to become a man than would have been the case if his father had been employed elsewhere. On the other hand, the pit had a reputation for being dangerous. There was an explosion in 1844, the year of the great strike, which was attended by the loss of ninety-five lives. Apprehensions of similar catastrophes were constant. Whilst Mr. Burt was working there, word went through the village that "the pit had fired." He remembers the terror that was occasioned by the report, and the tearful thankfulness of those who learned that no accident had taken place, and who saw their husbands and sons and brothers safely brought to bank.

One learns from various sources that though he was strong for his age, he was a shy, sensitive boy, far from fit to face all the dreadfulness of the life that he had chosen for himself, and with an imagination that could create its own terrors. Many of the pitmen were good, chapel-going folk, but others

were quite the reverse of that, and the free swearing of many of the men was particularly horrible and startling to a lad brought up in so pious a household as that of Peter Burt. However, he soon hardened to the disagreeable aspects of pit-life. More troublesome to a boy with a mind like his was the weird aspect of the land of shadows into which he daily descended. At first there was something positively appalling in the darkness, which is gross blackness at first, and then something corresponding to Milton's "darkness visible." There are flickering lamps here and there, but they only throw into relief vast phantasmagoric shadows in distorted human shape, looking like the genii of the "Arabian Nights." In respect of the endurance of a life amid such surroundings the pay was tenpence a day. The boy had to remain at one post during the whole time, in total darkness. His work was to watch a door, the purpose of which was to direct one of the air currents of the mine. Thomas Burt was, in fact, what is known as a trapper-boy. Tubs would come swinging down now and again, with "putters" behind them, on their way to the workings. "It was my business," says Mr. Burt, "to open and shut the door when the putters passed through, and on their return journey." A perilous business, demanding great wakefulness from a boy of ten, during more hours than any boy is now permitted to work.

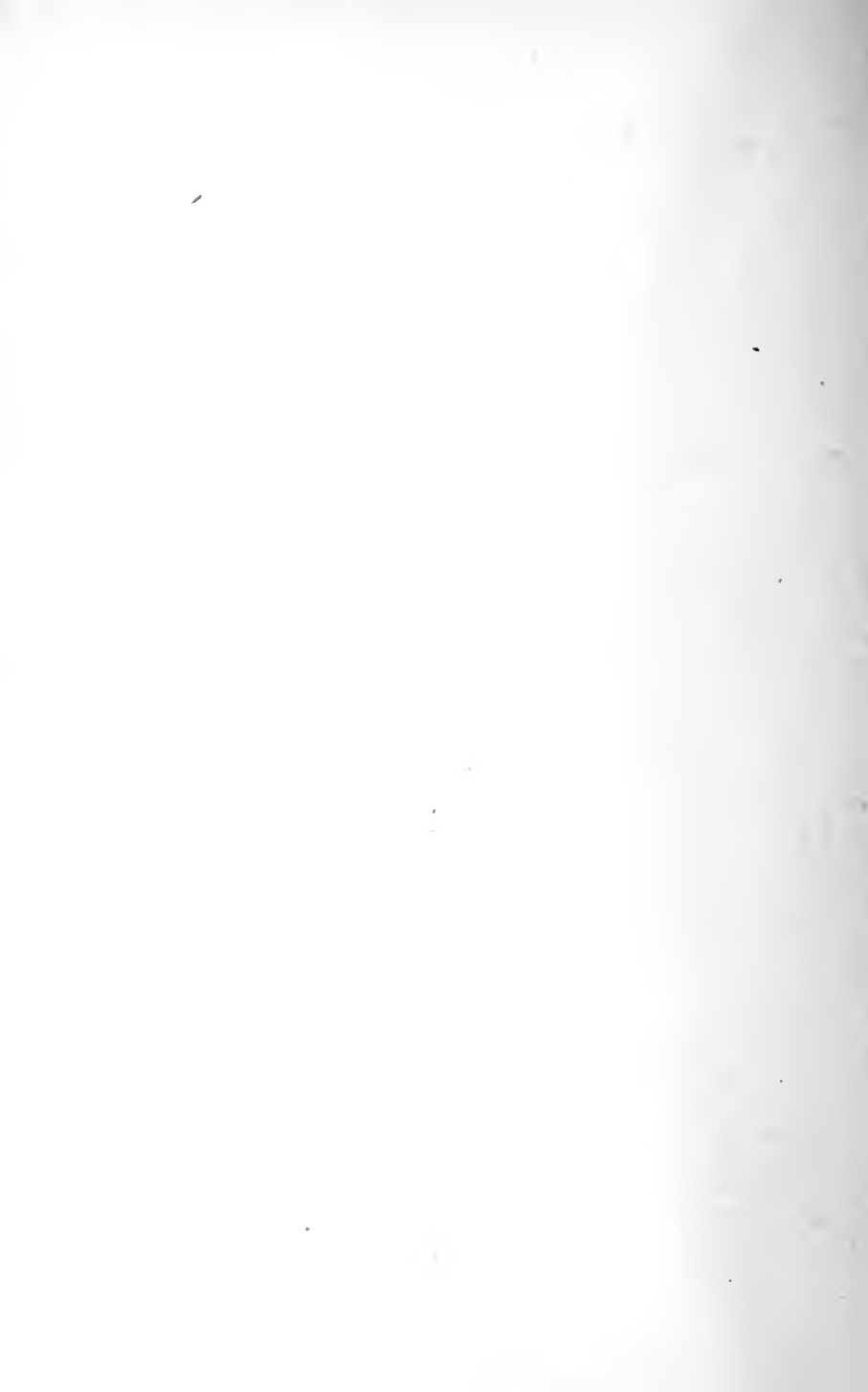
There was a narrow escape from a catastrophe on one occasion. The tired boy went to sleep; his door was on a rather steep descent, and of course it was not opened as the tubs came down. When the sleep-stricken trapper-lad awakened it was with a sound of smashing timbers in his ears. The tubs had carried the door away, and then had run off the rails on the other side. Fortunately, nobody was hurt, and the result to the lad was only a severe admonition from the manager, not that punishment or dismissal which had been looked for.

There was, on the contrary, a rather speedy promotion. Two or three weeks after this accident Thomas Burt became a donkey-driver, at a wage of a shilling a day. He was placed in charge of what he calls a marvellous animal, the best-

tempered creature underground, but with awkward peculiarities. "Old Spanker" would put up with any sort of treatment, but he would never "go" unless he liked. Spanker seems to have been of the opinion of some of those Anarchist workmen who contend that they earn their wages in the first two hours of their day's work, and who are excellent workmen in the morning, and dawdlers for the rest of the day. For two or three hours Spanker was ready for anything that he was required to do. "He buckled to with a will," says Mr. Burt, but he was quite a go-as-you-please donkey, for the remainder of his time. Nevertheless, he and his driver were great friends, and it was almost with regret that young Thomas Burt received his next promotion, which placed him in charge of an active and spirited pony, bearing the attractive name of "Lady," a quite friendly and agreeable animal, with an apparent enjoyment of its work. Ponies were, in general, much overworked in those days, as the pony drivers were, indeed. They were also liable to much ill-treatment. Young Thomas Burt, as may be surmised, got on good terms with his pony, made a pet of it, and eased its lot as much as was possible without falling short in what was expected of them both. "Lady," on her part, greatly appreciated her new master, doing full justice to her name by means of her kindly and proper behaviour, and even by some show of affection. When a move was made from Haswell Colliery it was matter of regret that "Lady" had to be left behind, though the next employment was one of some responsibility, and carried a wage of eighteenpence per day.

IV

EARLY EXPERIENCES UNDERGROUND



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WHILST working at Haswell Colliery Mr. Burt had a narrow escape from death in one of its most terrible forms. Work was over for the day, and men and boys were hurrying towards the pit shaft, on their way upward and homeward. With the usual considerateness of miners, the boys were permitted to ascend first. On this occasion somebody shouted "Get in" before the cage was down. Young Burt, eager for the daylight, leaped forward at once, and had just been pulled back by an alert miner who was standing near when the cage came banging down on the place where he had stood. Had a moment been lost in the act of rescue he must have been crushed out of recognition.

Another incident connected with Haswell Colliery deserves to be mentioned before proceeding, as soon becomes necessary, to other scenes. Peter Mackenzie—afterwards the Rev. Peter Mackenzie, one of the great forces of Wesleyan Methodism in his day—was a hewer at Haswell. He worked at first with Peter Burt—they were "marrows," that is to say—and their joint earnings were to be divided equally. When the first "pay" under this arrangement came round, Mackenzie insisted on returning part of his share of the fortnight's earnings to the elder Burt, on the ground that as he was only a beginner he was not entitled to "go halves." But the other Peter would not agree to an arrangement of this kind, and he sent his son, who was ten or twelve years Mackenzie's junior, to carry back the money which the great preacher that was to be had refused to accept. Thomas

Burt thus first met the pitman who was to become one of the notable men of his time, and the two never again encountered each other until the young pony-driver had become member for Morpeth.

In the meantime Peter Mackenzie had acquired a reputation which drew crowds to hear him in whatever part of the country he went to lecture or to preach. He had been taken out of the pit and sent to college to be trained for the ministry; but college professors could make nothing of him. They returned him as hopeless. Nevertheless, those who had sent him to be trained by these gentlemen knew that there was a great deal more in this man than was likely to come out in an examination. He was therefore permitted to go on preaching, and it was not long before the authorities of the Methodist Connexion agreed to forego the usual examinations for the ministry, and allow Peter to enter on his "probation." It was one of the wisest decisions at which they ever arrived, for the power of Peter Mackenzie's preaching was like a strong wind among the wheat; and, besides, there was no man in the Connexion who was his equal in drawing together those financial means which are the requisite sinews of war. Peter Mackenzie was a man without polish and without pretence. He had a keen wit, and, for a preacher, an unusually broad humour. And though the professors could make nothing of him, he possessed a genuine faculty for self-education on lines of his own. His sermons and lectures were full of allusions indicating a rather wide reading, which did not preserve him from mistakes and anachronisms, but brought richness of phrase and breadth of illustration to the aid of such original powers of description as are very rarely at the command either of preacher or writer.

When Thomas Burt and Peter Mackenzie met again after the Haswell Colliery days it was at the close of a temperance lecture at Newcastle-on-Tyne. The lecturer was introduced to the new member for Morpeth, and remarked on the strangeness of the fact that they had never met before. Then Mr. Burt reminded him of the former meeting, and of his father. "God bless the lad!"

Mackenzie exclaimed, throwing his large arms round his neck; "are you the son of Peter Burt? He was one of the best men I ever knew."

What Mr. Holyoake calls, in an interesting pamphlet of his, "a wayside hamlet known by the Hiawathian name of Running Waters," was the place to which the Burt family removed when, in the usual course, the time seemed to have come for another migration. This was in 1848. Father and son worked at the Sherburn House pit, some distance away, the stay at Running Waters extending over two years. As the colliery was not working very regularly there were now many opportunities for delighted rambling over the neighbouring hills and moors. This was one of young Thomas Burt's pleasures of solitude. He did not look for companionship. Most of the boys among whom he could have found it were bigger and rougher than himself. He sometimes ran races with them, being quite expert in running and leaping. Also it became necessary to fight some of them, and there was one battle as hard, and for a while as uncertain, as Dobbin's renowned conflict with Mr. Reginald Cuff. Out of this Thomas Burt came bruised and wounded, but with the honours of victory. He could always find some one to fight; but for real companionship with a boy who loved to wander among the woods and the heather and the bracken the other lads had no genius.

There were the usual disastrous accidents of mining life at all the collieries at which Thomas Burt worked. At Sherburn a tub ran over one of his legs, and incapacitated him for a while. At the same place he stepped, in the darkness, into some reservoir of boiling water, and though he was severely scalded, he decided to make light of it, and limped home on his scalded foot, with the result that when his stocking was pulled off part of the skin came along with it. There was neither working nor walking for some weeks after that. This accident was followed by a strike at the colliery, which belonged to the Earl of Durham. There was trouble over the alleged short weight sent up by the hewers, and the consequent confiscation of tubs of

coal. There was then no system of check-weighing. All the weighing up was done on behalf of the coalowners, and the miners determined to stand out for the right to appoint a man of their own to see that the weighing was honestly carried out. Many meetings had to be held, and at these young Burt's uncle was a frequent speaker. The member for Morpeth still remembers hearing a miner say to his mate, "Let's get nearer. Tommy Burt's speaking. I alwis like to hear the Burts, 'cause we're sure to get sense fra them."

It may have been during this local strike that Peter Burt removed to South Hetton, working at Murton Colliery, about two miles away. It was a doleful change for his son. "The days at Running Waters were pleasant and joyous," he says, "but at Murton I spent some of the most miserable days of my life." His work was known as pony-putting, and, including the walk to the pit and home again, it extended over from fourteen to fifteen hours a day. It was hard and dangerous work, too. The strain imposed was far beyond the lad's strength. The pony had to be assisted uphill now and again, the youthful driver pushing and straining behind. Sometimes the tubs would get off the rails, and then there was a great, unassisted struggle to get them on again. There was here a constant demand for energy, strength, and dexterity, besides the other qualities of knowledge and experience.

Thomas Burt was then thirteen years of age. "Don't tell me," said the manager, when the lad's father tried to get him an easier job. "He looks more like sixteen." And so the hard daily round had to be pursued as before. There was constant danger of injury, and even of death. The putter-lad had to crouch down when he rode, lest his head should come in contact with the stone of the roof. There was danger of collisions at crossways and turnings, where there were no switches; and young Burt came by many a wound and bruise in the course of his daily work. The arduousness of it was heart-breaking. He was so tired at the end of the day that, as he says, "After dinner I not infrequently threw myself, unwashed, on the bare floor,

and fell fast asleep. Except pay Saturday, which was a holiday, all the hours were spent in work and sleep."

This was that dark hour before the dawn. "To my intense delight," he says, "our next flight was northwards." It was not very far to the north, but it was to the old nest. "My mother," says Mr. Burt, to whom his mother was everything in those early days, "always spoke of Northumberland as our home." And that part of Northumberland from which they had fled was precisely that part to which they now returned. They went back to Seaton Delaval, that is to say, and actually settled there after a while. All the wanderings through that unfriendly wilderness of Durham came to an end, and all wanderings whatever after a few months' time. At length there had been found a secure haven. "It was a home-going," says Mr. Burt. But Seaton Delaval was not actually the first home after this return from the desert of Sinai, otherwise Peter Burt's native county. First there was a halt at New Hartley, where one of the most thrilling of mining accidents took place not many years later. Then there was a short sojourn at Cramlington, the central mining district of Northumberland. The settlement at Seaton Delaval was happier in all respects than these brief experiences at other collieries, and was to last much longer than any of them.

Thomas Burt's work at Hartley was hard, but not disagreeable to him. He had to push behind the tubs where the pit gradient was steep; a sufficiently uninspiring kind of work, at any rate, the cheerfulness with which it was accepted being worth looking into by philosophers as an example of the manner in which the species "pitman" adapts itself to its environment. The youth was happy; but the father, already much worn by labour harder and more long-continued than that of the convict who is committed to penal servitude, had failed to get a good "place," and found the day's toil telling upon him severely. The work was trying and the pay was meagre. But the smallness of the pay was not then the worst feature of the situation.

The pit was working irregularly. It once happened, or it may have happened more than once, that there was only ten days' work during five weeks. We have heard much of late about the subsistence limit, as a consequence of the inquiries of Mr. Charles Booth ; but this, surely, was something below Mr. Booth's limit of subsistence, and yet it was no infrequent condition of affairs, either in Northumberland or other parts of the national coal-field. A man might work for a day or two and then starve for the rest of the week, which made him all the more eager to put up with only a couple of days' work in the week following.

However, the days that were grievous to the father were, apart from the consideration of domestic difficulties, joyous to the son. When the pit was not working he had unbounded liberty, inconceivably in contrast with the fourteen to fifteen hours a day that he had worked in the county of Durham. He was among familiar scenes. All his spare time was spent in the fields and in fishing by the sea, which meant fishing in the sea itself, where the whittings dart at the bait almost before it has been lowered. Hartley in this respect seems to have been a time no less of mental than of physical growth.

One cannot refrain from speculating as to how different the industrial world might have been to-day, how many stricken fields where labour was one of the combatants might have signalised disastrous events, if Thomas Burt had remained at Hartley Colliery, where he was wholly contented, and where the historic accident occurred ten years later. He would almost certainly have been one of the victims of that dire catastrophe. In 1878, or it may have been 1879, I walked with him along the sea-shore from Blyth to Seaton Sluice. We were leaving the miners' annual demonstration, which had been held on Blyth Links. At the nearest station we caught the train to Newcastle, and as we passed colliery after colliery, in a flat country with nothing more conspicuous than pit railways and pit engine-sheds, I said, knowing that we were somewhere in its neighbourhood. "Which is the Hartley Colliery?" He

pointed out of the carriage window at once. "There it is ; we are just passing it." A wreck of a colliery, but with its buildings in a sort of seemly ruin—there it was. He said nothing more about it ; but just brushed his eyes as we passed. As for me, I respected his obviously deep feelings, and did not attempt by any further questioning to awaken sad memories as we went by that awful scene.

The time to speak of the Hartley catastrophe may possibly come later. It was a result of what was then not more than the usual disregard of the lives of miners. In those days—and this is not a rhetorical expression—lives were not considered to be nearly so valuable as coals. The whole public sentiment has changed on the subject, so that what I say is not a criticism, but a record.

When the Burts removed to Cramlington there were no pit houses to be obtained, which was a grievous hardship, and the whole family had to content itself with such accommodation as was just then obtainable, which was one room. Cramlington was then a desirable place to live in but for its want of house accommodation. The pit, says Mr. Burt, was "under the benign management" of Edward Potter. The men had extreme freedom of action. There was no tyranny of officials. The day's labour was not enforcedly long. This was all very pleasant ; but it had its disadvantages. There was no proper inspection. The laxity of discipline in the pit increased the risk of accident. Men could work as long as they liked. They could make a short day or a long day. It was quite a happy-family affair. Most of them preferred to make a long day, of course, for extra hours of work increased the fortnight's earnings ; but others found the lax system disastrous, for it left them to idle away their time and to drink at their will.

This seems to be the proper place to record that in the Northern collieries there was no uniform system of working until twelve or fourteen years after the time of which I have been speaking. Certainly there was no actual system in the working of the Northumberland pits until the present Miners'

Association came into existence. It was the pitmen who organised an orderly day, not the employers, who never, until the consideration was thrust upon them with a good deal of quiet determination, seem to have had an idea that the men who made their wealth were entitled to be regarded not only as human beings, but as human beings of a rather uncommon order.

Strange men came out of the pits. One of those with whom Thomas Burt made acquaintance in Cramlington Colliery was Richard Fynes, a stout, mercurial man, who afterwards ran a theatre at Blyth, and wrote the only existing history of the Durham and Northumberland miners—a book that is both valuable and scarce, for Fynes stocked his book in his theatre, and when the theatre was burned down the stock of books went along with it.

The acquaintance between the historian of the Northumberland coal-field and the young man who was to add so many new chapters to the story of the emancipation of the miners of the North commenced in a way not entirely happy. Fynes worked in a very wet place, and it was the duty of Thomas Burt, as a junior, to clear out the water before Fynes began his shift. It was a duty for Hercules to perform. No one man could do it, to say nothing of a young one. Fynes was a man of almost excessive geniality; but one day, when his working place was not free of water, he “let out,” as they say in Northumberland. He regretted this afterwards, with a great deal of keenness. “My answer,” says Mr. Burt, “made, as he told me, a deep impression on him.” The two were always thenceforth great friends and helpers.

There were dangerous days at Cramlington. Through one of them there thrilled the immediate idea of death. The day's work had ended, and Mr. Burt and his pony were going “out bye,” which means away from the actual workings. There was a long dip in the seam, with no shelter or security in case of any threatened danger. “Everything is right, and you can gan on,” was the word given to the young miner. But everything was not right. Everything was, indeed, vastly wrong. The engine started, and a row of

tubs came rushing down on Thomas Burt and his pony. There was only one narrow line of rails, in a passage not too wide for it, and only a few minutes to consider whether there was any possibility of escaping death either for the pony or himself. There were no means of signalling for help, even if there had been time. Reversing the pony and running back was quite out of the question. There was just one chance for the driver, and none, as it seemed, for his companion. Young Burt caught sight of a ledge of rock, and climbed up on it, in agonies as to what would happen to the faithful beast with which he had established terms of comradeship. But the beast knew best. It was guided by an instinct safer than reason. There was a "sump," or roadside reservoir, close to the narrow underground waggon-way, and the pony jumped into this and waited patiently and safely until the helter-skelter tubs had passed.

There was another occasion on which he was engaged on what was known as water-leading. A tub of which he was in charge went off the line, and he was not powerful enough to put it on again. During his struggles his light went out, and he had to walk two miles in the darkness of the mine before he could "that light relumine." "But I was," he says, "a good walker in the dark."

Of smaller accidents and slighter dangers there is no occasion to speak. Boys and men engaged in coal-mining regard bodily injury as something that is "all in the day's work." But, happily, no sort of accident is now so common as it then was, and accidents of a serious kind have diminished in number to an extent that would seem incredible if it were not well established by figures.

V

THE AWAKENED HUNGER FOR BOOKS

CHAPTER V

THE AWAKENED HUNGER FOR BOOKS

THE residence of the Burts at Cramlington extended over about ten months, and then came the removal to Seaton Delaval, in the winter of 1851-2. Thomas Burt had then just completed his fourteenth year, and he worked at Seaton Delaval until he was twenty-two. The family, as he remarks, had at length come to an anchorage. Nevertheless the comedy of moving from house to house continued to be played at much the same intervals as before. Mr. Burt remembers that they lived in three, if not four, houses during this period of comparative calm. At Seaton Delaval there were no colliery cottages to be had when the Burts went there, nor for a long time afterwards. In Northumberland and Durham the colliery proprietors, in theory, provide houses for the whole of their workmen. The house is a part of the wage, as has been explained elsewhere, and has to be vacated when the period of service comes to an end. In actual practice the theory does not always work out quite ideally. If a colliery is busy there are seldom houses enough to meet the men's requirements, and this was the case when Peter Burt and his family returned, with so much gladness of heart, to the locality in which they had endured the hardships of the great strike. They rented a house, therefore, in Seaton Terrace, then in South Row, and then in Forman's Row.

Seaton Delaval was a model colliery village in its way. The houses were of the usual pattern, but they were not so much crowded together as in most pit villages. And some were larger than was common. There was a double row of cottages with two rooms on the ground-floor and bedrooms

above. By comparison, this was almost as good as a villa in a London suburb. Others had just the ordinary one room, with a pantry and a garret. But whether the houses were of the larger or the smaller sort they all competed with each other in orderliness and cleanliness. The extreme tidiness of the pitmen's wives is proverbial. "The marvel is," says Mr. Burt, "that there was either the desire or the ability to evoke order and beauty out of such unpromising material." But the thing was done, as it is to this day ; and we may be sure that the house of Peter Burt, in Forman's Row, was as neat and clean a dwelling as was to be found in all Northumberland.

There seems to have been no particular demand for Thomas Burt's services when he first settled at Seaton Delaval. Experienced as he already was in most varieties of pit-work, he was at first put only to odd jobs. Then he was advanced to his earlier vocation of pony-putting, at which poor employment he remained for a year or two. Thenceforward for a while, when he was between seventeen and eighteen years of age, he was sometimes putter and sometimes hewer of coal. His final advancement as a working miner came to him when he was eighteen. At that age he settled down to coal-hewing as his regular work, which it continued to be for ten years to come. As a putter he had been popular with the hewers, and Seaton Delaval, he says, was the pleasantest colliery in which he ever worked ; but he was eager to hew, and he was admittedly an expert miner. The work was much harder ; but the hours were not so long, and there was more money to be earned. The need for earning as much as possible had of late greatly increased. Peter Burt's health had at last broken down ; and he was compelled to give up work in the pit. The younger son was then a boy receiving a trifle over a shilling a day, so that at eighteen years of age Thomas Burt became the main and almost the sole support of his family.

Fortunately there were then no indications of that physical fragility which was to develop itself in later years. On the contrary, the young coal-hewer was unusually strong for his

age, as he needed to be, considering how long were the hours of work. There was then, as it may be necessary to repeat, no legal limitation of the hours of labour in coal-mines. It was not until 1872, more than twenty years later, that the Coal Mines and Metalliferous Mines Acts were passed, by the advanced and energetic Parliament which was elected in 1868. Until then the hours of work were a matter of agreement between employers and workmen. Generally, at Seaton Delaval Colliery, a hewer's day was about eight hours from bank to bank. At other collieries it was much longer. There might be an urgent order for coals, and then the men would be required to work at their hardest until it had been filled. Mr. Burt has under such circumstances, as a boy working double shifts, sometimes through his "mate" not returning to work, been in the pit over twenty-four hours on end!

The amount of money earned did not depend wholly on the industry of the miner, or on his strength and skill. There was then, as there is to this day, a large amount of luck in the miner's life. Some parts of the pit are much better to work in than others. A miner's earnings may vary to a quite considerable extent, according to the nature of the "place" in which he is working. As the hewer is paid by the ton, it becomes necessary to draw lots for places periodically, in order that there shall be no permanence in inequalities which would otherwise become intolerable. These lots are called "cavils," and it is possible for a man to draw a bad cavil one time after another, in which case his home is likely to go ill-provided. "Hey, Tommy, thoos drawn a good cavil this time!" exclaimed one of the delighted electors when Mr. Burt's return as member for Morpeth was announced. But he did not always draw good cavils in the pit, though it was generally possible to earn more at Seaton Delaval than at most collieries in the neighbourhood. There, too, he had the advantage of working with his uncles, Robert and Andrew Burt, who, he says, were "good marrows." The system was one according to which four "marrows" worked in the same shifts, dividing their total earnings at the end of each fort-

night, thus further remedying the inequalities produced by cavilling for places. There was seldom a full week's work at that time. Mr. Burt thinks the average was about nine days a fortnight ; but often he would work "between whiles" with his uncle, Thomas Weatherburn, at Seghill, a "clever, steady workman, and a serene soul," as his nephew calls him. There was one occasion on which Thomas Weatherburn saved many lives in an explosion, when, but for him, everybody in the pit must have perished.

Industry and skill, exerting themselves in conditions in which there was constant peril of permanent injury or loss of life, were in those days miserably rewarded. From the wages actually received deductions had to be made for working tools, candles, and powder. A hewer's average earnings the year round would be from about 21s. to 25s. per week. There was the addition of the free house and the free coals, but sixpence a fortnight had to be paid for carting the coals from the pit to the home. Yet the miners were singularly free from any sense of grievance, except when they had been clearly marked out for punishment by the colliery officials, or at those intervals at which there were stealthy attempts to increase the harshness of the terms under which they were employed. They accepted their lot, as a rule, as if it were among the ordinances of nature.

At Seaton Delaval commenced that wonderful course of self-education which has continued without intermission throughout Mr. Burt's lifetime. A member of Parliament who was admirably qualified to judge in such matters once described the member for Morpeth as one of the best read men in the House of Commons. This referred mainly, of course, to English literature ; but Mr. Burt has also read widely in the literatures of other countries, and times long past ; for the most part, as perhaps need not be said, through translations. Yet no particular desire for the acquisition of knowledge manifested itself until he was seventeen years of age, except by means of such minute questioning as had puzzled his grandfather Weatherburn when they were out on their walks together. There were few books at home,

and those were not well calculated to stimulate the thirst for reading. Peter Burt was a local preacher, as has been said already, and he possessed just such books as, it was then considered, no local preacher's library should be without, though it frequently happened that the local preacher had no library but the Bible and the hymn-book. Peter Burt was, for the time and the circumstances, exceptionally well provided with pulpit literature. There were "Barnes's Notes," as might be guessed, and some volumes of "Congregational Lectures," of "The Homilist," and of "The Christian Witness." There was no light literature of any sort whatever so far as was known. Peter Burt had the aversion that was then common among strictly religious people, with the Puritanic strain still strong within them, to all novels, plays, and books of that inclusive kind called "entertaining." There was, therefore, no mere feeding of the imagination in the Burt household. In his boyhood Thomas Burt never tramped with Robinson Crusoe over his desert island, or revelled in the "Arabian Nights," or dwelt with Gulliver among the Lilliputians, or accompanied Don Quixote in his mad and chivalrous wanderings. If he had a world of imagination it was a world of his own dreams.

To this general statement there are some exceptions to be made. One of his aunts had a copy of "The Pilgrim's Progress" hidden away in a drawer. It was too precious to be lent, even to a favourite nephew. That and the Bible were the only books the good aunt—a fairy godmother in this case—possessed. Young Tom could go there when he liked, and read the book; but he must not take it away. He read it as so many of us have done in our early days, with entire belief in its accuracy as a narrative of things that took place. Allegory is supposed to be especially attractive to children. Perhaps it is; but just because it takes the form of romance children hardly ever understand it as allegory. Certainly, Thomas Burt firmly believed in all that he read about Christian, and the Interpreter's house, and Giant Despair. And in this serious and believing spirit he obtained his first glimpse of the Delectable Mountains.

Not delectable, perhaps, though in no way really injurious, were the copies of the *London Journal* lent to him by a friend of his own age, and read industriously in secret, with the gloating pleasure of which so many other quick-minded boys have had experience. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published in America in 1852. It speedily made its way to this country, over which it soon spread in a flood of editions. It is not possible to name any book which has so directly and rapidly appealed to all classes of the population. Before long a copy of it had made its way to Seaton Delaval, and to the house of Peter Burt, where, being regarded as a sort of religious book, it was read aloud in the family circle, arousing in the mind of at least one of the hearers a craving to read other books of the same kind, as well as a passionate longing for the liberation of the American slaves. Mr. Burt well remembers reading "The White Slave," and the powerful and moving autobiography of Frederick Douglass. Thus he came to hear of William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, Whittier—"The Laureate of the Slave"—and the other strong and active minds who were then, even more than its statesmen, moulding the thought and action of the United States.

One day, by a miracle, an odd volume of Channing's works turned up among his father's literary possessions. It was a most unexpected and momentous discovery, for it contained essays on Milton, Napoleon, and Fenelon, and these, particularly the essay on Milton, which he read many times over, gave the first decided direction to Thomas Burt's mind in regard to English literature. A spur to effort and self-improvement he found in Todd's "Student Manual," a book which has been of immense service to thousands of young men engaged in self-education, but which is now so neglected that I believe it is published in none of those cheap editions which are making all the chief books of the world accessible, at the cost of a slight self-denial, to those whose means are almost as restricted as were those of Peter Burt.

After the reading of Channing's essay on Milton the young pitman in whose mind the lamp of knowledge had been lighted

had an unconquerable desire to read Milton at first hand. There were difficulties in the way almost as formidable as Giant Pope. All that he earned in the pit was handed over to his mother, who returned to him what she considered he should have at his own disposal as pocket-money. This amount, as was unavoidable, was woefully small ; but it was now all to be devoted to one purpose. No sacrifice needed to be made in the matter of drink and tobacco, for Mr. Burt has never throughout his life felt any need for drinking intoxicants, and as for smoking, " I twiff a cigarette now and then," he says. There were no extravagances of any kind to cut down, indeed, and therefore the only retrenchment possible was in matters of dress, and the possibility in this respect was just as small as it could be.

The reader of books, on however humble a scale, had to acquire them for himself in those days. To a working man there were no accessible libraries, either in town or country. The first free library was opened in Manchester in 1850, but twenty-five years passed away before the example was followed in Newcastle-on-Tyne. There was in Newcastle, however, a large and inviting group of bookstalls in the market-place, these stalls being then entirely devoted to the second-hand trade, not as now, when books are cheap, mainly to the sale of new editions. Men from the colliery districts were the chief supporters of these centres of illumination, for many other young pitmen besides Thomas Burt had become almost simultaneously convinced that they ought to know more than they had the opportunity of learning at any school ; and, in fact, some of the young miners at Seaton Delaval had formed a sort of mutual improvement class, of which Thomas Burt was an eager member. There was a railway to Newcastle even at that time, but the fare would have amounted in itself to more than it was possible to spend on books. When the young pitman set out on a book-buying excursion he prepared himself for a long walk, for it was sixteen or eighteen miles to Newcastle and back, according to the route. Thomas Burt made such an expedition once a fortnight at least, returning on each occasion with some new treasure.

The need of guidance in the selection of books is sorely felt by the solitary student, and, in the absence of competent advice, odd and serious blunders are not infrequently made. There came under my own notice the case of a working man who had a passion for natural history, and who saved up small sums of money until he had enough to buy Goldsmith's "Animated Nature," believing it to be the most authoritative work on the subject. Such mistakes, where the sacrifice is so great, are saddening to think of, for they are almost tragic. Goldsmith's book would have been excellent training for a young man desiring to acquire a style; but as teaching in natural history it was lamentable. "Goldsmith, sir," said Johnson, "will give us a very fine book on the subject; but if he can distinguish a cow from a horse, that, I believe, may be the extent of his knowledge of natural history." It happened that Thomas Burt had found in Channing's essays some clear guidance in one direction at least. When he went to the Newcastle bookstalls it was with the purpose of purchasing something or other by John Milton. Hunting hungrily among the contents of the stalls, he found some odd volumes of the prose works, and carried them home in a state of high exaltation of mind. He read all the books through, eagerly and voraciously, without consideration of subject. Then, on the occasion of another book-hunt, he came across Gibbon's "Decline and Fall." It was the familiar Bohn's edition, in seven stout volumes, and it was procurable on a sort of instalment system—by the purchase of one volume at a time, that is to say, until the whole seven had been acquired. The purchase was completed in due course; and then came trouble with the purchaser's father. Peter Burt, Puritan and Primitive Methodist local preacher, had heard of Gibbon, of course, though he had not read a line of him. The two famous chapters which deal with the early history of Christianity were known in Primitive Methodist and other religious circles as Voltaire was known—as something to be avoided and reprehended. And here was Gibbon, in the full seven volumes, with all their possibilities of mischief, in the small

household of the Primitive Methodist preacher, where there had never before been a division of opinion on any subject whatever. Many a time in his early days had Thomas Burt slept with a keg of powder under his bed, for in that situation it was customary to bestow the explosive, in what was considered to be the safest place in the cottage. Here was matter of a more dangerous sort, probably stowed away, though not for purposes of concealment, in the same spot. The father recommended Addison in place of Gibbon. Addison had written in defence of the Christian religion, and had he not a towering reputation as a writer of beautiful and classic English? These things Peter Burt had no doubt learned from the ministers to whom he sometimes listened, and whom he frequently entertained at his cottage. Addison was urged with gentle persuasion; but it was Gibbon whose splendid work the young man wanted to read, and as he was a young man of quite unusual clearness of intention and decision of character, it was Gibbon who won.

The reading of those seven volumes of Bohn's library, of sundry of the prose works of Milton, and of a treatise on Logic—for this was another recent acquisition—would have been a serious and laborious undertaking under any circumstances. Looking back, it seems as if it must have been a task impossible of accomplishment by a meagrely instructed young man who was working ever so many hours a day in the coal-pit. Yet the books were read faithfully and diligently, with the strongest desire and determination to get out of them all that was possible to a mind so ill-prepared for so strong a diet. The ardour with which knowledge may be pursued under difficulties has never been more amply illustrated. In the summer Sunday mornings Thomas Burt would be out in the fields by four o'clock, reading his Milton or his Gibbon. There was no spare moment when he was not at his books, except the time that was spent in going to Newcastle to procure more.

From one author the young and discursive reader felt his way to another. Books judiciously chosen are always introducing us to other books of a similar worthiness. Milton led

up to Cowper. Thomas Burt craved after the poets. He read no fiction, nor has he read much fiction to this day. Even the great Sir Walter does not seem to have attracted him until later life, when he read nearly all that "the wizard" wrote. But he got his copy of Cowper for eightpence—money painfully saved, and in this case gladly parted with. Then the little library was increased by Longfellow, Pope, and Wordsworth, all of them procurable in moderately cheap editions, even in those days. Most of the poetry was committed to memory, and so was carried to work, where it illuminated the gloom of the mine.

Those were the days when John Cassell and other far-sighted publishers were producing periodicals intended especially to meet the needs of the working man. Thomas Burt took in as many of these weekly or monthly numbers as his sternly-restricted means would permit. With immense eagerness he subscribed to Cassell's "Popular Educator," adding to it the "Educational Course" of the same beneficent firm. Then, to satisfy a need constantly felt, he took in "The Imperial Dictionary," at what was to him the considerable cost of 2s. 6d. a month. By these and other means he was able to get some knowledge of Latin and French, which he has retained and increased, so that, though he has no pretence to be an expert in either of those languages, the ordinary quotations made in speeches have never presented any difficulties to him. French he reads with no great difficulty, and has found his knowledge of it useful at International Labour Congresses, and in many other ways that will fall to be spoken of later on.

Concerning some results of this early familiarity with Latin and French I may here relate a couple of anecdotes, though they have reference to a much later time. At the first International Congress of Miners the late William Crawford was one of the English delegates. He was the leader of the Durham miners, and their representative in Parliament—a rough diamond, but a man of great force and ability. Mr. Burt found him one day trying to explain himself to a waitress at a Belgian hotel. It was something

very simple that he wanted ; but he was utterly incapable of making his wishes known. "What do you want, Crawford?" said Mr. Burt. The bewildered man explained. Mr. Burt turned to the girl, with a few words of doubtful French and more dumb show, and soon, to Crawford's astonishment, what was wished for appeared on the table, the waitress smiling in pleased appreciation of her own readiness of understanding. After that Mr. Crawford always referred to Mr. Burt when he was in a difficulty about language. "Ask Burt," he would say, with confidence, "trust to Burt," obviously taking it for granted that the friend and colleague who had got him out of his small difficulty with the Belgian waitress had a profound understanding of the manners and language of the most polite people in Europe.

The other anecdote has more seriousness. When Mr. Burt was Secretary to the Board of Trade there was a conference between himself, his chief, and some other public servant. This third person suddenly digressed into Latin, and the then President of the Board of Trade replied to him in the same language. What was being said was obviously something that Mr. Burt was not intended to understand, but that he really understood well enough as it happened, as he signified by placing himself beyond hearing.

When the first Newcastle Free Library was opened, now more than thirty years since, Mr. Burt found himself on the same platform with James Russell Lowell and Challemeel Lacour, the French Ambassador whose appointment was made the occasion of some bitter speeches from the Irish benches in the House of Commons. Called upon to make a speech, he said, among much else that was of interest and value, that as he sat there he had been considering that no man had been more indebted to books than himself. At about the age of fifteen, when working as a pit-lad in Seaton Delaval Colliery, he spent the first eighteen-pence he was master of on a book. Again and again, when he had pocket-money to spare, he walked from Seaton Delaval to New-

castle and back, in order that he might spend it in books. He could not find words in which to express the advantages that a magnificent library, such as that which they had met to inaugurate that day, would have been to him at that particular time.

No wonder that the words were spoken with deep feeling. Such a library would have been of incalculable service to him in his youth. It may since, as one surmises, have helped many students equally earnest, if not equally qualified to rise to eminence and public usefulness.

VI

FIRST PUBLIC WORK—AND MARRIAGE

CHAPTER VI

FIRST PUBLIC WORK—AND MARRIAGE

IN summer, as we have seen, Thomas Burt read his books in the fields in the early morning. In winter he retired to the attic of the little pit cottage, stored with the lumber of household effects. Here, too, in his moments of leisure, the bad weather found him at any time of the year. To relatives and friends this diligent student was a subject of somewhat bewildering speculation. What could his object be? It did not enter into their minds to think that roaming discursively through a great literature such as ours is, like virtue, its own reward, or that the sole purpose of a student may be to acquire knowledge and find enjoyment. There was much wonder and questioning, therefore. The questions were simple enough—as simple as they could be, indeed—generally taking one form. “What was he aiming at?” His replies had an equal simplicity. He was aiming at nothing. Reading books was his way of enjoying himself. No further explanation than this was forthcoming. And to say this was to speak the whole truth about the matter. Thomas Burt was not acquiring knowledge as an instrument of ambition. He had not become ambitious at that time, if he ever did. He did not even look to the pulpit for an opening, as do so many promising youths of his class. He aspired after no new career and no leadership of any sort. If he was not wholly contented with his lot, as he could scarcely be, seeing how hard it was and how uncertain, he accommodated himself to it without repining, and certainly did not then think of changing it for another.

It happened, nevertheless, that he trained himself for his future as if by design. The breadth and variety of his studies was remarkable. Without the assistance of a teacher, he acquired a competent knowledge of Pitman's shorthand. He was not an expert, as he says, but he made acquaintance with the system to assist himself in making notes of his reading, and he has since constantly employed it for that purpose, so that he writes it with more ease and facility than longhand. "You must excuse my spelling," he wrote many years ago to the author of this book. "The truth is that it has been spoiled by the use of phonography."

This spare, industrious, but pleasant and fruitful life at Seaton Delaval came to an end in 1859, when he was still only twenty-two years of age. The reason was one of those then almost perpetually recurrent troubles between the miners and their employers, whose shortsightedness and inconsiderateness are beyond the understanding of those who live in better days. The dominant idea in the minds of the colliery owners was that the men must be "kept down." There had really been no very great improvement in the conditions of the life of the coal-miner since 1844. The separation of large and small coal still continued an unsettled question. The hewer necessarily makes both small and round coal, and both varieties find their market; but he was paid only for the large, or round, coal, and in filling in the tubs he was supposed to separate the small from the round—to his own great loss. If he filled in the two kinds of coal together, even if the proportion of small was but as one to six, his tub was confiscated, and beyond that he had also to pay a fine. The adjudication on such matters was arbitrary and, as has already been pointed out, frequently oppressive. The fines were often two or three shillings a tub, and if complaint was made it was followed by dismissal. Local unions were formed here and there to protest against this treatment, and other matters relative thereto, but it was the men of a colliery against the owners of a colliery, and the men, being the weakest, invariably went to the wall. The hostility to unions was almost rabid, and if

meetings were held the miners who took any prominent share in them were marked down for dismissal, with the further consequence that they found it difficult to get work in any other pit in the county.

At a meeting held at Seaton Delaval in 1859 it was resolved, on some sudden emergency, to stop the pit on the following day. This was clearly illegal. Proper notice ought to have been given. But in these days such an illegality could only be proceeded against by civil process ; in those, it was a crime. If the employers broke a contract with their men they were subject only to a fine, which was so small that it was no punishment ; but if the miners broke a contract they were sent to prison, often with three months' hard labour. When this trouble arose in 1859 it was determined to make "an example" of the Seaton Delaval men. Nine of them were arrested whilst they were in bed, and hurried off to North Shields, the nearest Petty Sessions town. There was every possible element of harshness and inhumanity alike in the arrests and in the behaviour of the police and magistrates. The men arrested were not necessarily those who had been most active in the stoppage of the pit. They were those whose ill-usage would, it was thought, act as the most powerful warning to others. Among them was Thomas Burt's uncle Robert. Of the nine men arrested eight were sent to Morpeth gaol for two months each, and as the sentence was accompanied by hard labour they were put on the treadmill. The ninth man was liberated because he was subject to fits. On such occasions as these it was the custom of the miners to sustain the families of the men in prison, and to provide the men themselves with means of recuperation when they were liberated ; but few of those who were thus imprisoned because it was believed that they were those who would most feel the degradation of prison life really recovered from the effects of their gaol experiences. Robert Burt, who was a man of exemplary life, a class-leader and Sunday-school teacher, certainly never did. He had opposed the strike, but he was the foremost of its victims, and his imprisonment at Morpeth clearly and visibly

shortened his life. Mr. Burt speaks of these events to this day entirely without bitterness. He recognises the fact that they arose out of the intellectual and moral atmosphere of the time. The coalowner thought of his workmen as a certain Duke of Newcastle thought of his tenants : he could do what he liked with his own.

Thomas Burt, who had taken no part in the strike one way or another, nevertheless received notice to quit his employment a few weeks after it came to an end, as likewise did his uncles Andrew and Robert, the latter of whom had just come out of gaol. This was the usual thing to do. Men who were merely suspected of independence were dismissed without ceremony or pity. The circumstances surrounding these dismissals were especially cruel. It was mid-winter, when the coal trade was then usually at its worst. Punishment was obviously intended, but why it was considered necessary to punish Thomas Burt, a youth of twenty-two, who had never taken part in agitation of any sort, does not at all appear, unless we suppose that he was held to belong to a dangerous family. That the manager felt some shame in giving him his marching orders seems apparent from the fact that hints were dropped to the effect that he might remain for the asking. If he had gone to the office with bending knees and whispering humbleness he might have remained at the pit ; but for him that was clearly impossible, heavy as were the domestic burdens he had to bear. There was no submission, or appearance of it, but just a resolution to face the worst. Only once in his life before had Thomas Burt had to set out in quest of employment ; and fortunately the search on this occasion, the second and last, was not long. He was known as a hard and steady workman, though he was never very strong, never earning the highest wages, but only about the average wage, despite all endeavours. Consequently, to him was not applied the cruel expedient of excluding him from work altogether in his native countryside. Choppington Colliery was not far away, and there he obtained employment on the first application, as did also his two uncles and his brother Peter.

It was a notable day, that on which he first went to work in Choppington Colliery, a day marked with a white stone, and otherwise easily rememberable, for it was the 1st of January, not then reckoned among the holidays, as it is now. It has been well said that only those who have seen the interior of a coal-mine can understand the hardness and the isolation of a miner's life and the depressing conditions under which he labours. "A reflective, contemplative man is driven inward upon himself, and in self-communion and meditation is made strong. The unreflective, superficial man becomes a mere machine for hewing coals. The one comes to the bank to turn his dreams into realities and his visions into sober facts; the other seeks his rebound in the village tavern and on the coursing path." To which class of men Thomas Burt belonged it is not necessary to state. He now found himself presented with certain opportunities of usefulness aboveground. The scanty hours of study were broken into by the desire to help others along the path of improvement. At Seaton Delaval he had taught in the Sunday School and had addressed at least one meeting in favour of temperance. At Choppington he became unpaid secretary of the Northern Federation of Temperance Societies. The day had gone by for the sort of adventure school which alone had been open to him in his own childhood. The teachers who were only slightly in advance of their scholars were a disappearing race. At Choppington there was what is known as a colliery school, a building provided by the coalowners and managed by a joint committee of masters and men. Of this committee Thomas Burt was made secretary, the first recognition by his brother-miners of the wonderful organising powers he afterwards displayed.

Comfortably settled at a large colliery, where he was greatly esteemed by the managers as a good workman and by his brother-miners as a young man of high and unselfish aims, keen intelligence, and an uncommon faculty for quiet, persuasive speech, and earning "good money," he now began to think of marriage. The early affection for his cousin, Mary Weatherburn, the little girl whom he had once

dragged about in her home-made perambulator, had long ago ripened into the strongest and tenderest of all feelings. To these two, inseparable from childhood, there seemed to be no possibility of life apart, and so it came about that what has proved to be one of the happiest of earthly unions was celebrated at Bedlington in those early days of work at Choppington Colliery. Those who know Mrs. Burt find it unnecessary to praise her. Gentle, with a voice soft and low—"an excellent thing in woman"—with a mind thoughtful and refined, and intellectual abilities as far above the average as her other qualities, she has been an ideal wife, married to one whom she would herself describe as the best of husbands. "To a pleasant domesticity of disposition," writes their old friend Mr. Holyoake, "she united the charm of sympathy with the public usefulness of her husband." "A gracious-minded wife," he called her, a description on which it is not possible to improve. "I was married at Bedlington Church," said Mr. Burt, in a recent speech to the Bedlington people. "I count that unreservedly as being the best day's work I ever did in my life."

They have borne joy and sorrow together—much sorrow—these two companions from childhood. One of their sons, as will be hereafter mentioned, died in South Africa. There was a daughter who had all her mother's qualities of disposition and of intellect, who had also a real literary gift, and her father's interest in public affairs. She was married, already a mature woman, her father's companion and helper, to James Annand, who had been editor of the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* from the early eighties until shortly before the outbreak of the Afghan War, and who had declined a safe seat in Parliament in order to found and edit the *Newcastle Daily Leader* in 1885—a man of sound thought, a writer of unusual vigour, a real power within his own section of the political world. It was a marriage of kindred temperaments and tastes. One son was born, the child of many hopes, but the mother died almost before she could see how beautiful and attractive was the face of her little boy. Another tragedy



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MR. AND MRS. BURL.

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followed at an interval of a few years. James Annand, always eager for a Parliamentary career, always confident that his true place was in the House of Commons, was returned as member for his native district, East Aberdeenshire, at the General Election of 1906, and died quite suddenly before he had any opportunity of taking his seat.

In 1904, Mrs. Burt accompanied her husband to South Africa. After calling at Capetown, they proceeded by the same vessel to Delagoa Bay. "Preferring, as we did," says Mr. Burt, "to travel by sea, this was a distinct gain. There were passengers for Las Palmas, Capetown, Algoa Bay, East London, and Durban. Except at Durban, the stop was only for a few hours, just long enough to enable the passengers and their luggage to land. For Durban we had some 2,000 tons of cargo, and we were there five days." There were reading meetings on board the ship, promoted by a Mr. Haddon, an Englishman who had been forty years in South Africa, "a fine, genial, well-read man, fond of good literature, specially familiar with our best poetry." "At first there was some reserve and shyness as to who should break the ice," says Mr. Burt. "On Mr. Haddon's suggestion, I started by reciting Wordsworth's 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality'—a lofty flight, hazardous to the reciter, and rather a severe test to the auditors. All went well. Nearly every afternoon till we reached Capetown we foregathered to read or recite poems from Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and other great masters of poetry and song." Is there another Englishman, one wonders, who could contrive to recite Wordsworth's Ode all through?

VII

TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP, AND SOME RESULTS

CHAPTER VII

TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP, AND SOME RESULTS

IN these early years Thomas Burt, notwithstanding the fact that he was no agitator, and was wholly destitute of the quality which is now known as pushfulness, was not only held in high esteem by the miners of Choppington Colliery, among whom he lived, but was beginning to be known as a young man of unusual ability throughout the whole mining district of Northumberland. There was then in existence a not very extensive body known as "The Northumberland and Durham Miners' Association." It was another of the numerous attempts to found a strong trade union among the miners of the two counties; but it was in its infancy, it had no stored-up funds, and it had failed to get the majority of the collieries to join. Besides, Durham and Northumberland did not run well together in double harness. There is considerable difference of race between the men in the Durham and the Northumberland pits. Most of the Northumberland miners have belonged to the same families for generation after generation, the Burts themselves being a conspicuous example. Coal-mining in Durham has developed more recently, more rapidly, and over a wider area; for which reason large numbers of men have gone into the mines from other employments, and from all parts of Great Britain and Ireland. Concerning matters of organisation serious differences of opinion arose between the two counties. There was jealousy as to which section of the organisation should have its own way, and such disaffection

generally as threatened the union with the fate which had overtaken all its predecessors. It was at this crisis that Mr. Burt was selected by the Choppington men as their delegate on the Council of the Association. He took up the duties of this office, which were purely honorary, the delegates only receiving their day's wage and their train fare, with clearly defined intentions. He had a policy. In 1864, the year in which he was elected, there was a delegate meeting at Newcastle-on-Tyne, and he lost no time in moving, "That the miners of Northumberland secede from the Durham miners, and establish a union of their own; and that the union have for its name, 'The Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association.'" The Durham miners must have been as eager for a separation as the Northumberland men, for the resolution was carried unanimously, with the very happiest results to both sides, for the two unions that were then formed still continue to exist, and include almost all the miners in the two counties, though the number of men employed in the pits has increased enormously since 1864. The Northumberland Union still holds to the title given to it at that time. It is to this day "The Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association," and is one of the most successful, and, it should be added, one of the least quarrelsome, of all English trade unions.

The Durham Union—simply "The Durham Miners' Association"—has in course of time become much the larger of the two, the Durham coal-fields being so much more extensive than those of Northumberland; but at first it had its difficulties, from which it was not rescued until Mr. William Crawford became its leader. When the separation took place Mr. Crawford, a notably strong, masterful, rather domineering man, more disposed to dictate to the miners than to take their instructions, but with a frank geniality of manner which enabled him to play the master where he was really the servant, became the secretary of the Northumberland Union; but co-operative societies were then coming into existence, and he was offered in one of these a position which tempted him to resign that post after holding it for

about a year. Later on he became the secretary of the Durham Miners' Association, served that body with singular ability through a long course of years, and died as one of the miners' representatives in the House of Commons.

Mr. Crawford's retirement from the secretaryship of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association was the critical moment, the actual turning-point, in the life of Mr. Burt. The young Choppington miner was urged on all sides to become a candidate for the position made vacant by Mr. Crawford's retirement, and he declined. There were many other candidates, willing competitors; and he desired for himself nothing more than to remain at his work in the pit. This feeling he expressed in memorable words. "A workman's lot," he said, "should be in itself satisfactory, and he should be in no necessity of changing his occupation in order to better his position." That was something the like of which had never been said before. Underlying it was the conviction that the life of the miner might be so improved as to make it really worth living. This was what he considered the noblest thing to aim at, for himself and all his fellow-workmen in the coal-pits. He had not then convinced himself that he might serve the purpose better with his coat on than in a flannel shirt and with his legs bare from above the knees. But on that point the minds of the Choppington men were clear. "Like Cæsar, but from different motives," his friend, Mr. Holyoake, wrote, "he 'twice refused the kingly crown.'" But it was to no purpose. The miners of Choppington still persisted in nominating him as the "Agent Representative." They had no strong expectation that he would be elected; but their belief in him as the right man for the position was without limit. And, in fact, he was the man ultimately chosen. Reluctantly doffing his "flannel dudden," late in 1865, he became the head of a workmen's organisation which has made history.

Never did any man enter on a task so formidable under conditions more forbidding. There was, it should be said, no temptation in the salary. It amounted to little more than he could earn in the pit, and there were expenses attached to

it, and calls upon it, and uncertainties about it, from which the fortnightly pay at Choppington Colliery was free. Then there was a strike on hand, a rather desperate strike, with the origin of which he had nothing to do. It only affected Cramlington Colliery, but that was then the largest colliery in Northumberland, and the strike had already lasted eight weeks when he became secretary of the Union. The situation was critical, even bewildering.

The strike was the occasion of such incidents and scenes as had not been witnessed in Northumberland for many years. The events of 1844 were vividly recalled, and, on a smaller scale, the more violent of them were repeated. The trouble was brought about in the old way by ordering the miners to vacate their houses. The strike had been a very quiet affair up to that time, although it had lasted for close on sixteen weeks ; but when the "candymen" came, and marked with a cross the houses at which evictions were to be made, reversing a famous Biblical incident, the men became restive. There must have been deliberate provocation in choosing the house of Thomas Baulks, the Treasurer of the Association, as the first scene of operations, and also in the choice of the time and circumstances. Rain was pelting down when this first eviction was taken in hand ; but the wife and the children of the Treasurer of the Union were ruthlessly thrust out into the mud and the pitiless storm. Such cruel work might just as well have been done gently, and with some consideration for the young and the old. Absolutely no good purpose was to be served by carrying out a possibly necessary operation in the spirit of the Middle Ages and in the temper of mercenaries who have just captured a city. But these were the methods which had been handed down by tradition, and had always been supported by the law. The inhabitants of the other houses marked with a cross were dealt with as in Baulks's case. But that was not the worst. The candy-men seem to have been primed with drink, and to have set about their work with hungry stomachs. When they found food in a house they postponed the ejections in order to devour it. In mere wantonness they emptied dirty water

over a mother and her children. In some cases the furniture was flung out of doors through the windows. This was more than it was in the nature of flesh and blood to bear. The outraged husbands and fathers made a charge on the candymen, some of whom begged for mercy, while some others set off at their best speed for Newcastle, and did not slacken down long before reaching that place. Mounted police had been watching the evictions. Most of them were inexperienced riders, and when the women seized the "blazers" and the fire-tongs, and made a noise as of Pandemonium, the horses were thrown into panic, and there was general confusion, and a woeful amount of injury to both sides.

So startling a beginning as this led to a temporary suspension of the evictions ; but only that a more severe and certain blow might be struck later on. One morning when the evicted folk awakened they found that Cramlington was full of policemen, who had been marched into the village before daylight. They had come to make arrests, and several of the miners were carried away to the Moot Hall at Newcastle, the centre of the county police administration. Meanwhile Mr. Burt and others were exerting themselves to restore and maintain order. A meeting of the delegates of the Union was held, when those who had taken part in the attack on the candymen were severely censured, and the people of Cramlington were advised to maintain a peaceful attitude, whatever occurred.

The village was by this time in a state of siege. Mounted police patrolled it night and day, and soldiers were sent down from Newcastle to keep order whilst the remaining evictions were carried out. On their way they passed six men who were being marched off to Morpeth Gaol on remand, for "that they did, at the Chapelry of Cramlington, on the 12th of October, unlawfully and riotously assemble together, with divers other persons to the number of three hundred or more, to disturb the public peace, making great riot and disturbance, to the terror and alarm of her Majesty's subjects, and did also unlawfully assault and beat one

Matthew Taylor," one of the candymen. The cases were ultimately tried at the Newcastle Spring Assizes, the men being meanwhile let out on heavy bail. Some of the accused were sentenced to nine, some to eight, and some to six months' hard labour, many other cases being dealt with summarily.

Such, then, was the condition of affairs when Mr. Burt first gripped the helm of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association. The financial position was deplorable. There were only twenty collieries and 4,000 members in the Union, and the balance of money in hand when Mr. Burt took office was £23 and some odd shillings. If the men on strike received a shilling apiece they would nearly exhaust the funds in a single week. Starvation faced them, in fact, whilst Mr. Burt, a young man of twenty-seven years of age, just out of the coal-pit, was confronted with a problem as to which his experience could assist him to no manner of solution.

But where experience failed there was mother-wit, the energy of young manhood, and an outlook on life at once bright and confident. As there were no funds, and as funds were most bitterly needed, he set himself to raise them, facing the situation with a most singular readiness of resource. It was impossible to win the strike, which was not a wise one, and which he would have prevented had he been in office when it broke out. The coalowners had no difficulty in getting men from Cornwall and Devon to fill the places of those who had left their work. That had, unfortunately, always been easy when there was a dispute in the Northern coal trade. The men of Devonshire and Cornwall were not in those days even so well off as the men of Northumberland and Durham.

What was possible for Mr. Burt under the circumstances was to take such measures as might mitigate a great calamity. Mr. Holyoake writes: "What journeys, meetings, committees, speeches, public letters, devices, negotiations it took on Mr. Burt's part to maintain the defiance of the men with advantage it is easier to imagine than describe, and Mr. Burt

would render no assistance in estimating it" (as, by the way, he will not to this day). "Under his prudent counsel and their own good sense the men behaved with heroic self-restraint and fairness, which elicited so much sympathy from their brethren in other parts of the country that their little balance was augmented by £4,000."

Though the bulk of the collieries in Northumberland were still outside the Union, they responded most promptly and generously to the appeal for funds; and but for the aid of miners who were not trade unionists the Union itself must have gone to pieces.

This was Mr. Burt's "baptism of fire." Has any trade union secretary immediately on his appointment had to go through so severe a mental and physical strain, or come through a great trial to as great a triumph? Mr. Burt not merely saved the situation, but consolidated his Union. When the strike concluded there remained a balance of between £600 and £700 in hand.

Into the trade union movement the young secretary of the Northumberland miners brought not only new energies but new ideas. There was now a fund in hand almost unexampled in those days. What was to be done with it? The custom up to that time had been to distribute among the subscribing collieries any surplus remaining at the end of a strike. The miners, that is to say, denuded themselves of all means of future defence. Mr. Burt, seeing the folly and the harm of this, and perceiving, as Mr. Holyoake says, "the value of a good commissariat in war-time," advised that the surplus should be held as the nucleus of a central fund to meet emergencies such as that which had just come to an end. The miners now trusted him so much that they at once accepted his advice in regard to this very important matter, with the result that when he entered Parliament in 1874 the reserve was climbing up towards £20,000, the membership of the Union having meantime increased to more than 16,000.

Part of the extraordinary fitness of Mr. Burt for leadership was a consequence of the fact that he had no grievances against the employers. He had not been "cradled into"

leadership "by wrong." Some wrongs he had suffered, indeed, and his father had suffered more ; but he did not resent them on any personal grounds. They were the effects of a system which was gradually improving, and which, as he saw, could be improved out of existence by judicious action on the part of the miners if they were thoroughly organised. One may say with confidence that no feeling of soreness on his own part ever influenced his conduct of labour disputes on any occasion. His determination from the first was to get better terms for the men by getting on better terms with the masters. For one thing, his life at Choppington Colliery had not merely been endurable, but pleasant. Mr. Cole, the manager, had been less his employer than his friend. What Mr. Burt clearly perceived at that time was that the line of advancement was also the line of least resistance. If the condition of the miners was to be improved it must be through amicable arrangement with the employers. It was a time in which trade union leaders were considered to be reckless authors of mischief. Well, Mr. Burt has from the first, and in every crisis of his life, been a conciliator, with results that have made his influence most beneficially felt in every section of the labour world. He never aimed at "fighting the masters," but only at improving the condition of the men.

Out of this noble disposition arose great consequences. Not many years had passed since, as we have seen, miners were taken out of their beds and sent to prison when they left their work without due notice. Mr. Burt and his Union organised a system under which strikes became almost impossible. The coalowners had from old times refused not only to meet the men or their representatives, but, as in the strike of 1844, to acknowledge any communication received from them or in their behalf. This luckless and insensate state of affairs was wholly changed under Mr. Burt's wise leadership, and without the usual arbitrament of war. A new kind of coalowner had come into being, wealthier, more cultivated, less arbitrary, than his predecessors. It was possible to "deal" with such employers, and Mr. Burt and

his Association dealt with them in round-table discussions and on grounds of equality, as representing the men in that full sense in which certain of the coalowners represented the employers. When differences arose there was a conference instead of a strike. Nowadays the representatives of the coalowners and the representatives of the miners meet together in Newcastle, discuss questions as to which disputes have arisen, mutually examine the accounts of the collieries for the purpose of arriving at a "county average" of prices for coals, and settle the dispute, or settle the wages, as becomes men mutually interested in the welfare of a great industry.

Sir Charles McLaren, M.P., chairman of the Metropolitan Railway, and managing director of Palmer's Iron and Ship-building Co., one of the most eminent of our industrial magnates, said recently, in reference to the refusal of the directors of certain railways to meet the representatives of the railwaymen's union, that when, twenty-five years ago, strikes were frequent in the coal trade, he sought to induce coalowners to encourage miners' agents and the Miners' Federation, because in labour questions, if they had experienced men on both sides, they would be likely to form correct views. There was not a coalowner who did not wish to see the Miners' Federation strong, and what was true of the Federation applied to other trades also. The country, he added, would not be the loser if the railwaymen's organisation were placed on the same footing as that of the miners. This was a most notable pronouncement, coming from such a source ; but years before the time spoken of by Sir Charles McLaren, Mr. Burt and his colleagues had brought about in the Northern coal-field what that excellent member of Parliament was striving to effect elsewhere.

The first interview of a deputation of the men with the representatives of the employers took place in Newcastle in December, 1871. The men's representatives were Messrs. Grieves, Nixon, Cummings, Brown, and Burt. The first request was for a reduction of the hours of the boys to ten per day. After an amicable discussion the mineowners con-

sented to a day of eleven hours. Little more than a year later another deputation asked for an advance of 15 per cent. wages, and obtained 10 per cent. This method of coming to terms struck the employers as a vastly better arrangement than settling differences by means of strikes, and at the beginning of 1873 the Joint Committee was formed, and has continued its beneficial existence up to the present time.

VIII

THE CRAMLINGTON STRIKE, AND A
CONTROVERSY



CHAPTER VIII

THE CRAMLINGTON STRIKE, AND A CONTROVERSY

ON being appointed secretary to the Northumberland miners Mr. Burt was attacked in some quarters with a virulence which now seems inexplicable. One of his offences, it appears, was that he wrote quite excellent letters to the *Morpeth Herald*, the most important of the newspapers published in the mining district of Northumberland, in defence of the men who were on strike at Cramlington. He was also believed, on no evidence whatever, to be a fomentor of strife. Evidently, it was assumed by the employing class, which could, as yet, know little about him, seeing that he had not previously been engaged in trade disputes or in agitation, that he was what is called in the North "a firebrand." One poor fellow was discharged from his employment because he had taken tea with the new trade union secretary. Another was similarly treated because he had been seen to shake Mr. Burt's hand. This small persecution was no doubt, in a manner, impersonal. Any other miners' secretary would have been subjected to it under the then existing circumstances. Special to Mr. Burt, however, was a venomous and ill-mannered attack which appeared in the chief Newcastle newspaper, and was signed "Coalowner." The secretary of the Union must have had some previous knowledge of it, for he wrote to the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*: "In your paper of Friday a long letter appears, purporting to be an answer to a letter of mine which appeared in the *Morpeth Herald* a fortnight ago. This letter, signed 'A Coalowner,' was sent to the above-mentioned paper and was refused insertion, on the

ground that the name of the writer was not appended, though it was in answer to a letter to which the name of the writer *was* appended. I do not on this account find fault with you for having inserted it, for you do not perhaps act on this rule, and you have a right to suit yourself. But there is one of your rules that you have certainly violated—as a rule you do not insert answers to letters that have appeared in other papers. This rule you have violated, and violated it to insert a letter which for scurrility and vulgar abuse is equal to anything that ever appeared in the notorious *Miner* newspaper in its worst days.”

Probably the writer had disclosed his name to the editor of the *Chronicle*, for that newspaper said of him, in strange phrase, that he was “a man of acknowledged ability.” What the “Coalowner” said is of no consequence now, except as being the occasion of a most trenchant and yet fairly urbane reply. The *Chronicle*, which was not taking sides in the strike, was obviously distressed because it had made the mistake of publishing an anonymous letter full of abusive language, for it said, rather plaintively: “We deliberately violated a known rule for two reasons—first, to give our correspondent an opportunity of stating the case of the masters; and, second, to establish our own fairness in the controversy. We regret to say that our motives have been entirely misunderstood, that we have given satisfaction to neither party, that we have since been charged by both masters and men with designing to damage their respective causes.”

The contents of the “Coalowner’s” letter will be readily inferred from Mr. Burt’s reply, which demands preservation, in its main portions at least, no less as an excellent example of the controversial style, and also as a disclosure of the main points involved in the struggle, than as being a sort of early adumbration of the writer’s views on the proper relations between capital and labour. However, some examples of the “language” employed against the pitmen and their leader may be quoted for the sake of the amusement they may afford and the astonishment they will provoke. The *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* itself was astonished. It said: “While we have no desire to interfere in the controversy between ‘A Coal-

owner' and Mr. Burt, we cannot but remark on the contrast their letters disclose. The 'Coalowner's' letter is full of the most violent abuse. Confounding the men with their leaders, the leaders with the led, the writer pours out a torrent of disordered invective on all who are opposed to him. 'Falsehood' and 'impudence' are the most modest words he condescends to employ. When he speaks of Mr. Burt he completely loses command of his temper. 'Jack Cade,' he says, 'is an angel to him,'—he is another Dogberry, anxious to be written down an ass—nay, he is 'Balaam's companion.' Nor is our 'Coalowner' less outrageous in speech when he speaks of the men on strike. According to that gentleman, the Cramlington pitmen are 'noisy ranters,' 'violent demagogues,' 'empty-headed demagogues,' 'jackals,' 'lions' providers,' 'lazy, artful fellows,' 'poor, ignorant fellows,' 'ruffians,' 'savages,' 'wolves,' 'swaggering bullies,' 'sneaking curs,' 'knaves,' 'designing knaves,' 'tools of knaves.' A choicer specimen of Billingsgate than this letter of 'A Coalowner' it has never been our ill-fortune to be called upon to print." Of Mr. Burt's reply, these are the more material passages: "As the letter is the production of a large coalowner and, as you say, 'a man of acknowledged ability,' I may take it for granted that it represents about the best that can be said on that side of the question. The writer has not hurried himself over it, as it is a fortnight since the letter to which it purports to be an answer appeared. I do not reply on account of the personal attack made on myself. So far as that goes, I could afford to treat it with the contempt it deserves. The writer, though evidently having the disposition, has not the skill to wound. As Macaulay observed of a bitter but an unskilful opponent, 'His ill-nature would make a very little wit formidable. But, happily, his efforts to wound resemble those of a juggler's snake. The bags of poison are full, but the fang is wanting.' I reply to it because the latter contains falsehoods which, if allowed to pass unchallenged, might be believed to be true." Mr. Burt then proceeds to say:—

The first sentence will stand as a good advertisement for the *Morpeth Herald*, which is, to use this gentleman's grandiloquent language "frequently illuminated

by the misty lucubrations of a certain Mr. Burt " (I do this gratis for the *Herald*). Illuminated with mist? I am next charged with saying that it is not fair to prevent the Cramlington men getting employment elsewhere! I repeat distinctly and emphatically that it is not fair. " Did the pitmen not themselves " he asks, " advertise to request no men to apply for work at certain collieries, as the said collieries were preparing for a strike? " What is the use of hinting indistinctly about " certain collieries " ? The question is about Cramlington Colliery, and I say positively, and without fear of contradiction, that the men of Cramlington did not advertise for men to stay away, nor did they authorise any one else to do so for them.

He next asks, " Did the men not by unfair means interfere with strangers brought to Cramlington to work? " I answer, " No, they did not. " But the men were brought by unfair means—decoyed from their homes by false representations—and as soon as they knew the real state of affairs they declared they would not start work. Rather than do so, they said they would trudge back to Scotland on foot. The Cramlington men, however, paid their return railway fare, and this is what " A Coalowner " is so indignant at. The strangers, I repeat, were brought by unfair means. They were told that the dispute at Cramlington was over, and that the men would be glad to receive them. I called this " unscrupulous " ; but it seems that I do not understand the " meaning of the word. " The agent from Cramlington picked up a convicted thief fresh from prison to get men for them, and thus reinforced, they went forth telling lies, and drugging them with drink—doing, in fact, anything and everything to secure men. I called this " mean and unscrupulous " conduct ; but I probably do not understand " the meaning of the words " either. Probably not.

We are told that the men acted a most illegal part in sending the Scotchmen away. We shall see. If that be so, the coalowners lack neither the means nor the disposition to punish the men who sent the Scotchmen back again. " He, Burt, next calls upon us to look at the unreasonableness of the employers. I presume he means in asking possession of their own houses. " This " Coalowner " knows, or ought to have known, that I did not refer to owners taking possession of their houses when I spoke of their unreasonableness. The best defence that can be offered for the men remaining in the houses is afforded by the tyrannical conduct of this " Coalowner " and others in stopping them from getting employment elsewhere in the neighbourhood. He artfully insinuates that I took part in the disturbance. I throw back the insult, and tell him that I and all the leading men connected with the Union did what we could to prevent any outbreak. I have never uttered a word in defence of the disturbance that took place, but I do now say that it is grossly unjust to charge it altogether on the men of Cramlington. I say, further, that in judging of the case some allowance ought to be made for the peculiar circumstances in which the men were placed. Oppression, it is said, drives men mad ; and " A Coalowner " will perhaps remember that even " Balaam's companion, " with all his patience, was provoked to speak out by the inhumanity and ill-treatment of his master.

Leaving unnoticed the " Coalowner's " gross personalities and vulgar abuse,

I pass on to notice the next point of importance in his letter. We are told that it is conceded by nobody but the men themselves that their claims are just. I say it is conceded by the public at large, as is proved by the way in which the men have been and are supported. I should like well if this "Coalowner" would throw aside his vulgar slang and condescend to reason. If he would do so I would enter fully into the discussion of the question with him.

The next point is the offer made by the coal trade, on which this gentleman lays great stress. This offer, stated in the "Coalowner's" own words, is "to allow the pits to be examined again, after they started work, by the two gentlemen appointed, in company"—mark—"with two working men to check them, if they should be guilty of any unfairness." I put it, not to this "Coalowner" but to any man that is not blinded by prejudice, if this is a fair offer? After the pit is examined who shall finally decide the dispute? Why, the coal trade, to be sure. These two working men, on whom he lays so much stress, are to be present, it seems, merely "to check the viewers if they should be guilty of any unfairness" in the examination; but the coalowners are to be the arbiters to decide the question. I have not the slightest doubt that this man will call this fair arbitration. It was called so by some of the coalowners when only two viewers examined the pit, without any workmen to "check" them. But will the public be so "unwary" as to call this fair arbitration? I trow not.

The next information he vouchsafes us is that the employers were "driven to unite by the tyrannical acts of the Union." False again! It was quite the opposite way. Three years to-day there was no union among the miners of Northumberland. There had not been one for years, and there was no sign of one being formed. It was the dullest season of the year for the steam coal trade. The men were defenceless, wholly disorganised; but the employers were not. What did the employers do? Some of them, it is true, were manly enough not to try to take advantage of the men's weakness. Was this "Coalowner," who spits fire at trade unionists, among this noble few who scorned to take advantage of the men? To be consistent, as an anti-unionist, he ought to have been. Was he? The great majority of the coalowners pounced upon the men at that dread time of the year, gave them notice for a reduction of wages, and the yearly bond. The men took the alarm; . . . one or two of these "noisy demagogues" who are honoured with this great man's abuse called a mass meeting of the men. The call was responded to. The Union then formed exists still, and probably will continue to exist as long as the tyrants live that called it into existence. Such was the origin of our "Union." I ask any impartial man whether the workmen caused the employers to unite or the employers caused the workmen to do so?

Wading through a great mass of verbiage I come to the next question: "Does he" (he means me) "know that the average earnings through this colliery and other steam collieries are from 5s. 6d. to 6s. paid for six and a half hours' work, with house rent free, garden, coals, and doctor, and that even as much as 16s. per day has actually been paid to strong, willing men,

who did not please to submit to the dictation of the Union, but worked for as much as they could make?" Where shall I begin with this tangled mass? What does the writer mean by "this colliery"? Is it Cramlington? If so, I am prepared to prove that the average earnings when the men came out on strike were not more than 4s. 3d. per day, exclusive of the money kept off at the colliery office. In answer to the question, "Does he know? &c.," I say "No," nor am I prepared to believe it on the authority of a man who has not the courage to append his name to his letter, and who has already been convicted of half a dozen falsehoods.

Does "he" (the Coalowner) "not know" that it is false to say that the miners have coals and doctor free? They generally pay 6d. per fortnight for each. Any man in this neighbourhood can have a doctor's attendance at the same rate; and with regard to the coals, is 6d. per fortnight not sufficient for the rubbish generally supplied?

A "Coalowner" will excuse me, but I must have good authority before I can believe that there are men earning 16s. per day on any of the steam collieries. That a man might, on some favourable occasion, make such a sum is possible enough. On the other hand, I can give instances of men working all day for a shilling, but it would certainly be glaringly dishonest to bring this forward as an everyday occurrence. If this would be dishonest, then the "Coalowner's" statement is equally so.

I never before knew that the employer had a claim on the gratitude of the workman for employing him. I always thought that the advantage was mutual, and that the workman had fulfilled his part of the contract as soon as he finished his day's work. If I be wrong—this gentleman employs his workmen, not for his own profit, but purely from motives of humanity. Then he certainly deserves the "gratitude of his men."

The "Coalowner's" letter hangs badly together somehow. In one part we are told that the leaders of the Union are a set of "plausible knaves, whose sole object is to live upon the hard-earned money of the working classes, whilst they strut about in fine clothes and idleness." Then, towards the conclusion of his letter, we are told "that the whole thing terminates with the punishment or ruin of the ringleaders." Which of these statements is true? The latter unquestionably. The leaders of trade unions too often suffer from such tyrants as this "Coalowner" seems to be. I may say, on behalf of the delegates of our Union, that they are all hard-working men, who earn their bread honestly, and are certainly not deserving of the abuse heaped upon them by this "Coalowner." I am no advocate of strikes, but they are sometimes inevitable, from the tyranny and greed of the employer: and it certainly is false that the men are always the losers. I could give many instances in which they have succeeded both in preventing reductions and in securing advances of wages. Our censor speaks of the men being ruled by 'five or six' (he does not know which) 'violent demagogues, who are put forward to make a better bargain than they could themselves.' Now I unhesitatingly say that this is totally false as applied to our Association. It stands on no such rotten foundation. Our men are not ruled, but are rulers. They do not put

themselves in the hands of the Union. It is the coalowners that thus give up their individuality and manhood. As an example, take the strike at Cramlington. The men are untrammelled by our Association, and can agree to-morrow if they think fit. Can Messrs. Potter and Co. do the same? No. We employ no "violent demagogues," but I may inform "Coalowner" that if we should at any time need one he stands first, and will receive the first offer of employment. If the miners of this neighbourhood be the "savages" and "ruffians" he describes them to be, so much the more disgrace to him. He has probably amassed a large fortune through their services. What is he doing to educate and civilise them? Not much, I fear.

I have now touched upon all points of this letter that are worth notice, and I think I never before read such a compound of abuse, falsehood, and contradiction. If the writer wrote this to ease his mind, I hope he has got relief. If he was—in writing this snarling and offensive epistle—merely following the "bent of his genius," all I can say is, "let dogs delight to bark and bite," &c. But if he wrote thinking that it would deter me from advocating the rights of my fellow-workmen, he will find out his mistake. I was chosen agent for this Association for the purpose of doing the best I could to aid the workmen in securing justice. I did not force myself on the men. They urged me to take the office, and as soon as they can dispense with my services I am prepared to resign. But as long as I am in office I will do my best to serve my employers. Four months since I was a coal-hewer at Choppington Colliery. As a working man I was in comfortable circumstances; serving employers whom I respected, and who, I believe, respected me. I had been at that colliery nearly six years, and during that time I never had a wrong word with an official of the colliery.

"A Coalowner" may ask them if I am a "demagogue" or an "agitator." I left the colliery honourably, and I have no fear but I can get my work there again if I need it. If not, I can get work—I doubt not—elsewhere, and under good employers too, for I long since made up my mind not to work for a tyrant. I say this merely to let your readers know that the position I hold is not degrading either to myself or to the men who employ me. I am prepared to serve my brother-miners, if not with ability, at any rate with honesty and independence.

"The men are not fighting for mastership, but for wages," Mr. Burt said in another letter, and then went on to tell how not a single man from Cramlington had obtained work on any colliery in Northumberland where the employers were connected with the Coalowners' Association; and that the men who had secured employment and had been working peaceably had been dismissed as soon as it was known that they had come from Cramlington. Men in search of work had been compelled to migrate into another county before obtaining it, just in the old way.

The compliment paid to Mr. Burt by the newspaper in which the correspondence had appeared was probably the first he had received from such a source, and must have been at once gratifying and encouraging. Said the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*: "Mr. Burt, spite of the provocation he has received, almost entirely abstains from following the example of his assailant. He disdains to descend to the employment of coarse and opprobrious terms. For resisting the temptation to indulge in harsh and indignant language, we have a right to congratulate one of the ablest penmen the pitmen have ever engaged in their service. If the comparison in this case is odious, the 'Coalowner' has only himself to blame."

Mr. Joseph Cowen, who was only a few years in advance of Mr. Burt's own age, was then the proprietor of the *Chronicle*, as it is called in Newcastle for short, and he maintained a close supervision over what went into its columns. It is not unlikely that he may himself have written the passage just quoted. At any rate, Mr. Burt's letter first called his attention, in anything more than a casual way, to the new man who had arisen among the workers in the coal-pits. He became one of Mr. Burt's closest friends, and one of the most enthusiastic helpers of the cause of emancipation among the miners. But for Mr. Cowen and his newspapers, indeed, there might have been no miners' member for Morpeth.

IX
BEFORE A SELECT COMMITTEE

CHAPTER IX

BEFORE A SELECT COMMITTEE

IT becomes necessary here to interpolate a short chapter for the purpose of showing what Mr. Burt's views were concerning the conditions of life in the coal-mines before he was so wisely thrust into the position of leader. In June, 1865, the year in which he became secretary of the Union, but before that event had come to pass, he was examined before what was officially described as "The Select Committee to inquire into the operation of the Acts for the Regulation and Inspection of Mines, and into the complaints contained in Petitions from Miners of Great Britain with reference thereto." The constitution of the Committee was sufficiently remarkable to call for some words of special mention. The names of some of the members carry us back to what now seems to be a remote age in our political history. Mr. Acton Smee Ayrton was in the chair. It was this gentleman who, along with Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Robert Lowe, was so amusingly but cruelly satirised in a Gilbertian burlesque which, after a few representations, was peremptorily suppressed by the Lord Chamberlain. A man of great ability, he occupied a high position in the Liberal Government of 1868, but was so autocratic, so disagreeable in manner, so obviously conscious that he was always doing the right thing when he was invariably doing it in the wrong way, that when he was turned out of Parliament in 1874 nobody ever wanted to bring him back again. Yet in the course of this inquiry he proved himself to be a humane man, eager to ascertain the truth about the life of

the coal-miner because he wished to improve it. Another member of the Committee was Mr. Bruce, afterwards a most useful and beneficent Home Secretary, known in his later years as Lord Aberdare. Then there was Lord Cranborne, another notable figure, who was to become the intimate colleague of Mr. Disraeli, who had described him as "the master of gibes and flouts and sneers," was to accompany that statesman to the Berlin Congress, to succeed him as the chief of the Tory party, and to occupy the position of Prime Minister over more years, even, than Palmerston or Gladstone. The names of other members of the Committee, notable in their day, have so completely vanished from public recollection that it could now serve no purpose to recall them.

When Mr. Burt appeared before the Committee, the chairman asked him, with his customary abruptness, "What are you?" "A coal-hewer," said Mr. Burt—an answer which was also returned by Mr. William Crawford when he was asked the same question. Mr. Ayrton put this astonishing coal-hewer through an examination on the subject of the employment of children in the mines, and the answers of Mr. Burt throw much light on what, after sundry but not great reformatations, had come to be the conditions of life in the mining districts of Northumberland a little more than forty years since. He said that at that time something like 1,500 boys were employed in the pits, at ages ranging from ten to fourteen years. "They are engaged with their work twelve hours," he explained; "and, of course, they are necessarily engaged a greater length of time than that. They are necessarily engaged from fourteen to fifteen hours in the day between leaving their homes and returning." A question which followed seems rather foolish and unnecessary, but it was probably well-intentioned. "After they have begun their employment," Mr. Ayrton asked, "do you find that their education advances?" The reply was such as might have been expected. "Generally," said Mr. Burt, "there are no facilities for that. It is only at night-time that they have the chance of being educated, and

at most collieries there is no provision made for that. In a few there is provision made; but in general, from the length of the hours of their employment, they are so tired and fatigued that those who do go are found to sleep a considerable part of the time that they are at the schools." It was only in very exceptional cases, he explained in reply to further questioning, that they improved their education after taking to work in the collieries.

The miners of Northumberland and Durham have of late years been accused in both Houses of Parliament of callous selfishness in making their boys work longer hours than themselves, though the hours worked by boys are now not more than ten. Mr. Burt told the Committee that the general impression among the miners was that children commenced to work too early, and that they worked too long. His own opinion, he said, was that twelve or fourteen years of age was early enough for boys to go to work; and it should be noted that long afterwards, at the Berlin Congress, and in Parliament, he was in favour of forbidding child employment until the age of fourteen had been reached—the view to which he had adhered when he was before the Special Committee so many years earlier.

"Was the money earned by boys working in the pit necessary to their parents?" was one of the more pointed and practical of the questions which followed. Mr. Burt thought that in general it was not necessary. Children commencing were usually paid a shilling a day. "For the most part," he said, "the parents could live without the money." The almost absolute lawlessness of the pit districts at that time, so far as employers were concerned, was interestingly illustrated by some further questions and answers. In cotton mills and factories children were only worked half-time until they were twelve years of age. That was actually the law of the land, indeed. "It is not enforced in our district," said Mr. Burt. He knew of no efforts to give children three hours a day for two days a week, which was also the law of the land. Of the northern districts of Northumberland it used to be said that the King's writ

never ran there. At the much later day to which Mr. Burt's evidence referred, the Queen's writ did not run in the southern portion of the county so far as it had reference to the employment of children in mines. "The provisions of the Mines Inspection Act were evaded in that respect," said Mr. Burt, in the course of his evidence; and they were evaded in many other respects, as was proved at the inquest on the Hartley accident, which stirred the heart of the country more deeply than it has been moved by any mining catastrophe either before or since.

Even at that time, as has been said, Mr. Burt was of opinion that boys should not go down the pit before the age of fourteen. Yet, as he had stated previously, the number of boys employed between ten and fourteen years of age was "something like 1,500." The number of adult colliers in the district was about 5,000, or, taking all above fourteen to be adults, about 6,000. "In the whole county of Northumberland," he said, "there are 7,500 persons employed in mines." The great growth of the mining industry in the intervening period may be measured by these figures. There are much more than 20,000 members of the trade union of which Mr. Burt is the head, and this does not include the whole of the miners employed, though there are few non-unionists in the Northumberland pits.

There was something worse about the employment of children than the long hours of work. They went underground, said Mr. Burt, from three to four in the morning, and their labours came to an end at four to five in the evening. There was the time for knocking-up, practically in the middle of the night; there was the time for washing and dressing; there was the time for the walk to the pit; there was the time between leaving work and getting home again; and thus the twelve hours' day was prolonged into a day of fourteen or fifteen hours. "I would in all cases prevent the employment of children under fourteen," was Mr. Burt's firmly repeated declaration when further questioned. He admitted that it would be hard on some parents to recommend legislation which would prevent the employ-

ment of children underground before they were fourteen years of age ; but he would, nevertheless, in all cases prevent it. "Is legislation required against the parents or the employers?" he was asked. "It is required against both, I think," was his reply. He would not venture an opinion as to whether parents or employers would oppose such legislation most.

Some hostile questions were put by one of the members of the Committee, to one of which Mr. Burt replied, with a shade of irony, "I have never known any accidents happen to boys from want of sleep, and such-like, in consequence of their having to attend the night-school ; but I have heard of their being so fatigued, and so on, while employed, that they have not been fit for their work, and that accidents have happened to them in consequence of that." "Have you heard," continued the infatuated Committee-man, "that they fall asleep over their books ? Is not that the sort of accident which is most likely to happen ?" To which Mr. Burt replied, with that pointed and gleaming humour which is one of his many happy qualities, "Yes ; that is the most usual accident which happens." His general conclusions on this subject were that only exceptional boys could profit by the night-school, that employers did not seem anxious that children should be educated, and that, therefore, some legislation was necessary in the interests of the boys of the pit villages. Of the trapper-boy he remarked, "He is imprisoned there just as if he were in a cell or a gaol." Then followed a conversation which I transcribe in full.

"So that you consider it a very painful thing for a boy of that age ?"

"I do."

"Has not a boy a lamp when he is keeping a door ?"

"Yes."

"What is to prevent him reading ?"

"When I kept a door, if there was any explosive gas or any danger, I had to keep it all day in the dark."

"The boy can read, if he has a light, can he not ?"

"I suppose that he would be found fault with if he was

discovered reading. He is there to mind his business. He has a duty to perform, and he has to attend to that in the first place. I have never seen a boy reading, and I do not think it would be allowed down the pit."

This vision—it was that of Mr. Hussey Vivian—of a boy so bent on self-improvement that he read books in the coal-pit, by the light of a Davy lamp or a tallow-candle, whilst his constant attention to a trap-door was necessary for the prevention of accident, makes possible a particularly vivid glimpse into some curious minds ; for the questions put to Mr. Burt do not appear to have been intended for fun. They were the serious questions of a great capitalist who was a not undistinguished member of the British legislature.

Speaking at a time of high wages, shortly after he had been returned to Parliament, Mr. Burt said, "I see evidences of comfort that I could not see many years ago ; and I see that, whatever else may have been done, very great numbers of the working classes have spent their wages in educating, and in feeding well, and in clothing well, themselves and their families." "I tell you this," he went on to say in the same speech, "that all my advocacy of short hours of labour and of high wages has been for ulterior objects. If I could not believe that it would make people better, and would not lay the foundation of higher social virtue and of greater intelligence on the part of the people, I should not care one iota for high wages and for short hours of labour." In reference to Mr. Lowe's famous saying, "We must educate our masters," he observed, "We take higher ground, and we say educate a man, not simply because he has got political power, and simply to make him a good workman ; but educate him because he is a man. Educate him because he has an intellect—an intellect of almost boundless power and capacity—for, as Shakspeare says—

"Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and God-like reason
To fust in us unused."

This was the text of many an inspiring speech, the reports of which—for we had verbatim reporting then—were read in all the colliery houses in Northumberland, and even over a much wider field.

This, however, has led me away from the inquiry of the Special Committee, which, so far as Mr. Burt was concerned, was mainly directed to finding out how the coal-miner actually lived. Did the colliers put much money in the savings' banks? Mr. Ayrton inquired. Mr. Burt thought that in general they did not; nor were many of them owners of their cottages, he said, in reply to a subsequent question. Did not a great many accidents arise from the carelessness of the men? asked Mr. Ayrton; and the witness admitted that, of course, there were accidents arising from that cause. Then this conversation took place:—

“Do you think that the character of the men would be improved if they went underground later, and with more education?”

“I do.”

“Do you think they would be more careful?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose that you can read and write easily?”

“Yes.”

“Could you read and write easily when you went underground?”

“I could read and write.”

“Did you afterwards take any pains to improve your education?”

“Yes.”

“In what manner?”

“Not until I became a coal-hewer. I was not just in the same position as regards that when I commenced coal-hewing as when I left off boy's work; but I saw the necessity of improving my mind, and after I became a hewer I set to and did the best I could.”

The examination then diverged to the conditions of work in the case of adults. “We have seams below thirty inches in the neighbourhood in which I live,” said Mr. Burt

"The men must go about on their hands and knees and do the best they can. It is a wretched affair when it is like that."

To a question as to whether the men were satisfied with the rules of the Act of 1860 the witness replied that the men wanted to have all accessible places in the mines ventilated. "I should like to state," he said, "that our men are complaining very much of the bad ventilation of collieries where there is not any amount of explosive gas. The ventilation is so bad in general that the men can scarcely breathe. They are quite unfit for employment of any kind after they have been a length of time in connection with their work. Indeed, just at the part of the mine where I am working, men have been obliged to leave their employment and come home in consequence of that. They have suffered from headache, and have been quite out of order. Some of them have been out of order for weeks, just in consequence of the bad state of ventilation where there is not explosive gas." "Noxious gases," he was asked, "may be injurious to health although they are not liable to explosion?" "Just so," was the reply; and the witness added, "in the main headways, as we call them, the air is generally good, and there is generally a pretty good current; but the air is found to be defective where the men work, and I would make it compulsory on the part of the masters, where the air was not good, either to shorten what we call the pillars—that is to say, the distance we work up the places—or to put brattices at the end of the places."

Mr. Burt said that he could not improve on the law as to ventilation; but here again was the case of a law which was not enforced. "Why do you not apply to the inspector?" he was asked; to which question he returned this striking answer, "To tell the truth, there are many men who are timid on that point. There are cases of men being 'sacrificed,' and losing their employment, in consequence of applying to the inspector." Besides, there were not inspectors enough. It was a rare thing for one of them

to be seen. In fact the mines in his neighbourhood were not inspected at all.

This was within little more than two years of the terrible Hartley accident, Hartley Colliery being in this very neighbourhood. At a meeting at Newcastle, held at the moment when the bodies of the victims of that melancholy and memorable catastrophe were being brought to bank, the Government inspector admitted that he knew nothing about the Hartley shaft, by which the accident had been caused. "Was it to be expected," he asked, "that an inspector was to go and hunt out particulars of a shaft that had been in use for years? . . . It was the fault of the pitmen themselves that they did not call the inspectors more frequently. . . . He hoped they would take warning from this time, and take the thing into their own hands. They had the power of making the inspector work. If they did not do it for their own safety they had to blame themselves." Was he to call in question the management of some of the ablest men in Northumberland? And so on.

Such was the temper of mind and the sense of responsibility of one who declared that he was admittedly the best and most experienced of all the Government inspectors. He had something like a hundred and fifty collieries to inspect, some of them in Cumberland. It was impossible, of course, that he could be an efficient inspector. Mr. Burt had his remedy for this state of things. It was the duty of the Government, he affirmed, to provide that in every dangerous trade and occupation the works should be carried on in a manner suited to secure the greatest health and safety of the workmen. There should be a system of sub-inspectors, he told the Special Committee. There should be in connection with each colliery a man who would knock about and see that things were kept right, a man who would not be afraid of himself—who should be afraid, that is to say, neither of the masters nor of risking his life in a dangerous situation.

What were the miners' grievances in those days? The Committee inquired rather particularly on the subject. The

chief, as will have been seen, were the inadequate ventilation of mines, the absence of colliery inspection, and the liability to be dismissed from employment if they did what the Government inspector blamed them for not doing. Others were of a more technical nature ; but they are nevertheless deserving of record here, as showing how the coal-miner was required to fight strenuously for reasonable treatment at every point. One of the grounds for some early strikes referred to in these pages was that there was no proper weighing up of a man's work ; in plain words, that the miner was cheated of a portion of his earnings. This was one of the main causes of the strike of 1844. When Mr. Burt was giving his evidence the right to appoint check-weighmen, or men who checked the weighing up of the coal on behalf of the whole of the men employed in the pits, had been tardily won. But though these check-weighmen were appointed and paid by the miners, the employers, said Mr. Burt, had "the power of putting them aside" if they did not like them. Still more serious was the condition of the weighing machines. The miners, the witness said, demanded that there should be true weighing machines on the pit bank. He was satisfied with the weighing in his own immediate district ; but "he had heard of machines which were not true." Here, as one perceives, there was a fine opening for another kind of inspector. There was no grievance as to the fortnightly pay, said Mr. Burt ; but there was a serious feeling of grievance in regard to the selection of coroners' juries. The men had no confidence in the verdicts given. No miner was ever summoned to a coroner's inquest, and juries composed of tradesmen frequently gave verdicts that were not in accordance with the evidence. "They are not champagne men," he said, in reply to a question implying that the miners were spending their increased earnings in high living ; "they go in for beer." Their hobbies were mostly innocent—sport and flower-shows.

Mr. Burt's examination produced a deeply favourable impression among the members of the Special Committee, several of whom were afterwards to sit with him in the

House of Commons, where they must have felt a peculiar thrill when they remembered how he had been asked whether he could read and write easily. What the miners of Northumberland would note when his examination was reported was that he had fully and carefully thought out every question which affected their interest, and that they suffered under no grievance for which he had not an adequate remedy.

All the suggestions that Mr. Burt then made have been carried out wholly or in part. In some cases, indeed, the improvements made have exceeded his expectations. The hours of the boys, it has been seen, were reduced to eleven per day on the first occasion on which the representatives of the men met the members of the Coal Trade Association. As the boys' hours are still a difficulty, however, it may be useful to quote further from Mr. Burt's evidence before the Select Committee. He was asked :—"Is there any practical objection to the time of the labour of the children underground being limited to that of a grown-up person?" and he replied :—"It would be difficult to let the boys work a shorter number of hours than twelve, providing all the others were working twelve hours. If the pit went for twelve hours it would be difficult, if not impracticable, for a boy to be taken away at the end of eight hours to undergo a course of education." "Would it be possible," it was asked, "that the boys should go down for the same period as the hewers and the grown-up people?" "No," was the reply. "I think it would be possible." "But it would require more boys?" said the Chairman. "Just so," said Mr. Burt; and the deficiency in the supply of boys has, in fact, always been the trouble in the Northumberland coal-field.



X

SOME TROUBLES OF LEADERSHIP

CHAPTER X

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THE young leader was very slightly disturbed by incidents of the character described in the last chapter but one, and disturbed not at all by the infelicitous rebuffs of which he was sometimes the object ; as when he and William Crawford were travelling down to Bristol, at the time when Mr. Burt had become a candidate for the representation of Morpeth. A Blyth shipowner was in the compartment in which they travelled, and he lamented to both of them, whom he did not know, though they both knew him, the degradation which was about to fall on a famous constituency. "But Burt is a respectable chap, isn't he?" Crawford inquired. "Oh yes, he's respectable enough," the shipowner admitted ; "but man, alive, *he has now!*" This was the sort of thing that Mr. Burt could thoroughly enjoy. When he was roused into indignant remonstrance it was by the attacks which came from those miners who were jealous of a position which he had not sought, and which he desired to retain much less on his own account than on theirs. The working man, it has been said, is not a good employer of labour. The generalisation is, perhaps, too large ; but there probably never was a leader of working men who did not find more than his due proportion of what Thackeray called "thorns in the cushion." How far this was the case with Mr. Burt in the early days of his leadership, and what was the kind of attack and opposition to which he was subjected, may be surmised from a very plain-spoken manifesto that he issued to the men in the early part of 1872, just when, after a

long period of depression, the coal trade was about to rise to one of the highest summits of its prosperity. Mr. Richard Fynes, in his short but most useful history, now almost impossible to procure, makes this remark: "While all the world wondered at the great success which had attended Mr. Burt's labours, and all intelligent miners throughout the world admired the great zeal with which he had entered into their cause, a few malcontents set themselves to create a faction against him at the various collieries, and succeeded in bringing about a pretty considerable schism."

The year 1872 was wonderful. There was a return of what had been known in the colliery districts as "the pit-man's happy times." The hoarded millions of the French peasants, brought out of old stockings, and holes in chimneys, and from between mattresses, and other secret places where they had been lying idle, were paid over to Germany as compensation for the war, and put all the trade of Europe into an unusual stir. There was, in particular, a phenomenal demand for coal. The owners of collieries rapidly made fortunes, and it was said that the miners might have done the same if they had not launched out into almost criminal extravagance. Mr. Burt made one of his earliest successes in the House of Commons, when he had been returned to that body—a time which has yet to be dealt with—by replying to Sir John Holker, who told an amazed assembly how the miners fed their bull pups on mutton chops from the loin. He was able to show that the miners of Northumberland, at any rate, did not keep bull pups. If they were doggy, their tastes ran to greyhounds and whippets. He was able to show elsewhere that in this year of 1872 the average wage in the Northern coal-field was seven shillings a day, which was comfortable, but by no means splendid. Some of the miners were extravagant, no doubt, in a reckless, good-natured way, as if the good times could never end.

It was just as this era of prosperity was setting in that Mr. Burt became the subject of most exasperating criticism. There had been a proposal, not made by himself, to increase his own earnings, which were only those of a skilled

mechanic. It had also been suggested that he should have some assistance in his work, which had greatly increased with the growth of the Union. This made trouble in the lodges, the nature of which may be surmised from his own manly and outspoken remarks on the subject. In the manifesto which he issued to the members of the Association on the 3rd of April, 1872, he said that he was aware that men in positions like his own must expect to have every word and deed criticised. "For some years," he observed, "I have written and spoken and devoted my time to your service. I consider that of late I have been very ill-treated by some of the members of our Association ; but however much individuals here and there may be disposed to act unjustly, I have ever had confidence in the sense of justice and fair-play of the general body of the miners of the county. What I say will be said plainly, with no desire to give offence to any but such as deserve to be offended." Then the manifesto proceeds :—

It is now more than six and a half years since I became your agent. I had no personal objects to serve ; but being then, as I am still, a thorough believer in the value of union as an agency for improving the condition of working men, I, at the earnest solicitation of the men of the colliery at which I was working, placed my services, such as they were, at your disposal. How the duties of the office have been discharged it is not for me to say ; but I can honestly aver that it has always been my endeavour to promote, to the best of my judgment and ability, the welfare of the miners of the district as a whole. During the time I have held office the Association itself has certainly flourished and become what it is now. I was appointed almost in the midst of one of the most severe and protracted strikes that have ever occurred in the district. We had then no funds ; we have now several thousand pounds. We had then twenty collieries and about four thousand members in the Association ; we have now nearly fifty collieries and about eight thousand members. I do not claim any special merit in this, believing it is due to a variety of causes, chief among which is the general character and the spirit of the miners as a whole ; but this negative praise I may fairly claim, that had the general business of the Association been ill-conducted the whole time, such results would have been impossible.

He welcomed criticism, he went on to say ; but he thought that all reasonable bounds had been passed in some speeches recently made. Language that had been applied to him had

been coarse and vulgar. He was abused in the men's meetings without restraint. Was this fair to him? he asked; and was it likely to conduce to the welfare of the Association? Then he went on to say:—

Who are my masters? This is to me a vital question. Long ago I made up my mind never to have for my master a tyrant. I object quite as strongly to a number of tyrants. It is often said that working men are the greatest tyrants on the face of the earth. To this I do not subscribe. It is too general, too sweeping. But I can say, from bitter experience, that there are in the ranks of working men some of the greatest tyrants it has ever been my ill-fortune to meet with. Are such men my masters? I do not myself regard them as such, and I will never do so. It has been said at some places that I have had the situation long enough. Perhaps I have. If I have had it till I have lost the confidence of the men, I have indeed had it too long. I ask, and must have, the same personal rights as you yourselves possess. I came to you a free man, and I can only continue with you as such. I choose my own company. I shall correspond with whom I like. I claim to have, or that I ought to have, some little time to call my own, and this leisure I dispose of in my own way. I shall at all times claim the higher liberty of speaking as I think upon every question. I will never consent to become the mere tool and mouthpiece for any man, or any body of men.

There was much more of the letter, all similarly frank, all equally passionate in its claim to personal liberty in private life. Mr. Burt was now, as always, ready to go back to the pit if need be; but he would endure no mere domineering, and he would not concede to anybody whatever the right to carry criticism to the inner side of the threshold of his house. How far he had been touched to the quick by the character of the opposition against which he protested is shown by the fact that a postscript announced that the manifesto had been printed and issued at his own expense. He wished, however, that it should be read in the lodges as if it had been an official document, which, of course, was done.

Mr. Burt dictated his terms categorically. "So far as I am concerned," he said, "I tell you honestly that, while I desire to be of service to you to the utmost extent, I do not care, nor have I ever cared, an iota for the situation. If you wish me to continue in it, I can do so only on certain conditions, most of which I have already understood to be implied, if not distinctly expressed, in the very relationship



PETER BURT.

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that exists between us." Some of these conditions have been quoted above. Others were :—

Something must be done to protect me, and other leading men, against the personal attacks, in meetings at any rate, of the evil-disposed and the ignorant. I ask this in the interest of the Association itself, for if something be not done no man who is worth having will take office for you at any price.

As regards the wage question, now before you, I leave it for you to settle. I shall never differ with you on that point, so long as I get, as I have always yet got, sufficient to maintain my family. I am not, nor have I ever been, serving you merely for money. At the same time I may frankly say, however, that until you pay something like what is paid to other men holding similar positions I shall always consider the situation underpaid.

Mr. Burt was then living at Cowpen Quay, near Blyth, from which place his letter was dated, the miners not having up to that time provided themselves with any proper set of offices for their officials.

The issue of the manifesto was immediately followed by a powerful reaction in favour of its author. It was really a conquering document. The malcontents were not again heard of for years to come, and the Association, as a body, showed its devotion to Mr. Burt in many ways ; but chiefly by lightening his very heavy labours, and by housing him and his staff in premises not wholly unworthy, and yet not entirely worthy, of what had developed under his leadership into one of the strongest, most influential, and most advanced of the trade unions. Mr. John Nixon, who had for some time been treasurer, now became assistant secretary, Mr. Ralph Young becoming treasurer, and Mr. William Grieves president—all able and notable men, and all from the pits.

Some houses at the corner of Lovaine Crescent, Newcastle, overlooking what was then the Blyth and Tyne Railway, were purchased as offices for the Union, and there Mr. Burt and Mr. Nixon lived, by way of being always close to their work. And thither, too, came Peter Burt to spend an honourable and happy old age, Peter being a spare, thin, old man by this time, but active, rosy-cheeked, and cheerful withal, deeply interested in all public questions, and proud of, and no doubt a bit astonished at, his remarkable son.

In that same year of 1872, to which frequent reference has been made, two of the earliest Mines Regulation Acts were passed. One of these dealt with coal-mines and the other with métalliferous mines. "The chief labour in connection with these measures," says Mr. George Howell, "fell to the lot of the miners' delegates" (to the Trades Union Congress), "whose devotion, earnestness, and practical ability had paved the way, and whose fairness and prudence did much, during their passage through Parliament, to ensure their acceptance with no serious mutilation." "Without being invidious," Mr. Howell adds, "it is only right to say that Alexander MacDonald deserves much credit for his share in that onerous work." And so, let it also be said, does Mr. Burt. These, as Mr. and Mrs. Webb note in their "History of Trade Unionism," were the two leading officials of the National Union of Miners. There were ten years of earnest agitation behind the Coal Mines Regulation Bill, and its passage was naturally looked upon as a great event. All the miners of England turned to Mr. Burt for his opinion of the measure, for both his reputation and his influence had by this time become spread over the country at large. "I regard the Bill," he wrote, "as an honest and genuine effort to deal with a difficult subject. There is an earnestness, a directness, a boldness, and a grip in it that contrasts favourably with some of the timid and half-hearted measures passed by the Government. The Bill is quite a triumph. Never before in the history of British legislation did any section of the working classes so thoroughly leave their impression on an Act of Parliament. All the chief principles sought for by the miners they have gained. What is the secret of this success? From various quarters the miners have received valuable assistance. Several members of Parliament have taken great interest in their questions, and assisted them to the utmost of their power. The Press, London and provincial, has spoken out strongly in their favour. They are also under a debt of gratitude to their representative (on the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress), Mr. MacDonald, for the ability and devotedness with which

he has advocated their cause. They have succeeded because they have looked after their own business."

The new day had dawned at last, and Mr. Burt was careful to drive home the moral which fitted the occasion. It was the union of the men that had brought this good thing about, he said. The old saying, that "Union is Strength," had been justified, as it always is in the long run. "If there had been no unions there would have been no Miners' Bill." And then he went on to observe: "Having gained so much by the power of union, let the miners remain still firmly united, that they may win further conquests, and secure, and make the best of, those they have already won."

I forbear to comment on this excellent advice, and pass on to the time when Mr. Burt was in a position to influence Parliament from the inside. Even so early as 1868 he had been pressed to permit himself to be put in nomination as a candidate for the representation of the borough of Morpeth. He was then a little over thirty years of age, and if he had accepted the invitation extended to him he might now have disputed with Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman the title of "Father" of the House of Commons. This was the first project for sending to Parliament an actual working man. But in 1868 Mr. Burt felt that Parliament was not the place in which he could be most useful to those whom he had undertaken to serve. The Union, as we have seen, had made marvellous steps forward since he had taken up the direction of its affairs; but there was much to be done of the most highly important and far-reaching character, especially in the direction of substituting conciliation for strikes as a method of settling trade disputes, before he could be persuaded that his right place was anywhere but at home and among his own people. However, in 1874 the miners would take no further denial. They were determined to have a member elected from among themselves, and equally determined that Thomas Burt should be the man to be sent to Westminster as their representative. But thereby hangs a more than usually stirring tale.

XI

THE FIGHT FOR THE FRANCHISE

CHAPTER XI

THE FIGHT FOR THE FRANCHISE

WHEN the miners of Northumberland began to think of the direct representation of labour in Parliament the member for the borough of Morpeth was Sir George Grey, the nephew of the hero of the first Reform Bill, and the grandfather of the present Foreign Secretary. Sir George had held high office in many Governments, and had sat for Morpeth since 1853. Born in the last year of the eighteenth century, he was in 1868 a man far advanced in years, and no longer an active force in political life. But the miners had no desire to expel him from Parliament merely because he had become old in the service of the State. They would not disturb him unless they could bring forward the man on whom their minds were set. When they thought of Morpeth they thought also of Mr. Burt, who was strongly urged to permit himself to be placed in nomination when Parliament was dissolved. "Being the ablest leader and secretary they ever had," says Mr. Holyoake, "they were wishful to see him in a position in which political might be added to his official influences." Going to the House of Commons, however, did not at that time, as we have seen, coincide with his own views as to the best and readiest means of being serviceable to the cause of the Northumberland miners. It was not until another Parliament had passed away that he consented to be put in nomination as Liberal candidate for the seat then about to be vacated by Sir George Grey.

Morpeth, although it is an old Parliamentary borough, has only a small population. It has changed its aspect very little

or several centuries. The main thoroughfare still follows the lines of the Moor Path, along which the farmers further North, and sometimes the cattle reivers as well, drove their herds to the Cow Hill fair at Newcastle. The curfew bell still hangs in a tower in the Market Place. There is a King Edward VI. Grammar School near the narrow bridge which was formerly the only means of crossing the river Wansbeck at this stage of its beautiful and wandering course. On a conical hill above the town there stand the scant ruins of a castle which was once very extensive, but which seems to have kept a fretful little realm in awe with some difficulty, for as a sidelight on history it may be mentioned that in 1215 the Morpeth folk burned down their town in order that it might not furnish quarters for King John.

Compared with the Parliamentary borough, however, the town of Morpeth is only a large speck in a wide landscape. The town is still rural; but all round about it lie the rich Northumbrian coal-fields, in connection with which larger towns than itself have arisen. There is the important port of Blyth; there are the "villages," the immense villages, of Bedlington, Bebside, and Choppington. The borough of Morpeth is, in fact, a collection of towns, villages, and hamlets to which Morpeth itself is scarcely any longer a centre. At about the time that Mr. Burt became a candidate for its representation the municipal borough had a population of 4,600, and the Parliamentary borough a population of 30,250.

However, population counted for very little when election time came round. If the miners had run a candidate in 1868, they would, in all probability, have found themselves beaten. Only the merest handful of them, excluding such as resided in Morpeth itself, were on the Parliamentary register. It was held that, in the accepted sense of the term, they were not householders at all. They did not pay rent for their cottages in any direct form, and therefore they did not pay rates. They were presumed to have been left by the Reform Bill in the same position as the agricultural labourers, and as they accepted the situation, agitating for manhood suffrage,

and not for their individual enfranchisement, in that position they remained until the revision of the voting lists in 1873.

Mr. Burt was some time before this again being pressed to become a candidate; but he was now no more eager to enter Parliament than he had been some years earlier. Dr. James Trotter, of Bedlington, a strong, vehement man, who died in 1899, was among the first and the most powerful and persuasive of those who urged him to permit himself to be put in nomination. Employing a quotation from Coleridge, the future member for Morpeth asked him to speak only of possibilities. The election of a miner to the House of Commons, said Dr. Trotter, came well within the range of the possible. Part of the plan was to have the miners of the borough of Morpeth placed on the Parliamentary register. "But," said Mr. Burt, "had you not better get them placed on the register before seeking a candidate?" to which Dr. Trotter replied that if the name of the candidate were put forward it would help to win the franchise.

One of Mr. Burt's oldest and closest friends, the late W. E. Adams, for many years editor of the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, has told so well and spiritedly, and with such intimate knowledge of events, the stirring tale of how the miners of Morpeth won the franchise without any further appeal to Parliament that I shall not attempt to tell it over again. Mr. Adams was an actual combatant in the fight, not only lending the powerful aid of his newspaper, but giving personal assistance to those who had taken up the cause of the miners. In his book of reminiscences, "Memoirs of a Social Atom," he writes:—

Expectations that the hindrances to emancipation contained in Mr. Disraeli's Reform Bill could and would be removed were in due course completely realised. The credit of removing such of them as related to the residents of colliery villages and the occupants of colliery houses belongs to the miners of Northumberland. How this came about forms an interesting episode in the history of the borough of Morpeth.

The secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association, Thomas Burt, soon after his election to that office in 1865, showed so much ability in the management of the society's affairs, and endeared himself so much to his fellow-workmen by reason of his personal qualities, that there arose a strong

desire to see him in the House of Commons. But household suffrage, pure and simple, was not yet the law of the land. Of the thousands of miners in Northumberland only a few hundreds were numbered among the electors of the county. As occupiers of colliery houses, and so not paying rates directly to the overseers of the poor, they were considered not entitled to have their names inscribed on the rate books or on the register of voters. But some ingenious people in the neighbourhood of Choppington and Bedlington conceived the idea that the occupants of colliery houses, since they stood in respect to rates in about the same position as compound householders in towns, had equal claims with the said householders to the suffrage. To press this idea upon the authorities the Miners' Franchise Association was formed in the early part of 1872.

The inception of the movement, undoubtedly one of the most successful ever set on foot in the North of England, was due, I think, to Thomas Glassey, then a miner at Choppington, but afterwards a leading member of the Parliament of Queensland, and then a member of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Australia. Mr. Glassey, a native of the North of Ireland, had not been long in the district, nor had he always been associated with the Radical party. Indeed, he had until shortly before been a rampant Orangeman. When he did take sides with the Radicals, however, he went with them heart and soul. Being a man of resource, too, he soon made the whole coalfield ring with the claims of the miners. Associated with Mr. Glassey were two other notable men. One was Robert Elliott, author of a vernacular poem which created some stir at the time, entitled "*A Pitman Gan te Parlemint*." The other member of the triumvirate was Dr. James Trotter, one of four or five brothers, natives of Galloway, all pursuing the practice of medicine at the same time in Northumberland. James was also an Orangeman at the beginning of his public career. Like Glassey, moreover, he threw himself with ardour and enthusiasm into the Radical movement. The Franchise Association aimed at two things—the extension of the suffrage to all householders in the villages included in the borough of Morpeth, and the return of Thomas Burt as the first working-man member of the House of Commons. Both objects were achieved, but not before the district had become the scene of exciting events. Once, when Mr. Walter B. Trevelyan, the revising barrister, sitting at Morpeth, gave a decision hostile to the claims of the Association, Mr. Glassey, rising in great wrath, called all his friends outside the court. It seemed as if a revolution was going to begin there and then. I recollect assisting to throw oil on the troubled waters, with the result that the standard of rebellion was neither then nor later unfurled. Greater still was the excitement when a poem entitled "*The Morpeth Hubbuboo*" made its appearance. The name of no author was attached to the piece, nor did anybody at the time know whence it had emanated; but it was supposed to represent the feelings of the tradesmen and respectable classes of Morpeth. As the verses have become historical, I give some of them here:—

Come, all ye jolly freemen,
And listen to my tale,
How Morpeth served the Howkies,
And made them turn their tail.

And you, ye Howky beggars,
We dare you to come down !
And though you come in thousands,
We'll kick you from the town.
You dirty sneaking cowards,
Come back to Morpeth, do,
And we'll kick your Burt to blazes,
And stop your Hubbubboo.

The rascals, how they spouted
On sham gentility,
And swore the dirty Howkies
Were just as good as we.
They wanted rights of voting,
The law had ordered so :
What right to Rights have Howkies
Is what I'd like to know.
We'll let them drink our beer, sir,
The worst that we can brew,
It's good enough for Howkies
To raise a Hubbubboo.

Hurrah for Champion Robberts
That damned the Howky dirt,
The boy that thrashed the traitors
Who wished to vote for Burt,
That stood up for Sir Georgy,
And cursed the Howkies well,
And damned them and the Trotters
To trot right off to hell !
He showed them like a man, sir,
What brandy schnapps can do,
And soon smashed up the Templars,
And spoiled the Hubbubboo.

Nine groans for both the Trotters,
Confound the ugly quacks ;
When next they show their faces,
We'll make them show their backs.
Nine groans for Irish Glassey ;
If he comes here again,
We'll pelt him out with murphies,
And get the rascal slain.
Nine groans for Poet Elliott
And his North-Country crew,
And ninety for the Howkies
That raised the Hubbubboo.

Nine groans for Burt the Howky ;
 And if he ventures here,
 His dry tectotal carcase
 We'll soak in Robberts' beer.
 We'll put him in the stocks, too,
 And pelt him well with eggs ;
 We'll black his Howky eyes, boys,
 And kick his bandy legs.
 He would unseat Sir Georgy,
 He would be member, too ;
 We'll hunt him out of Morpeth,
 And spoil his Hubbubboo.

The effect of the publication was instantaneous. Not only did the pitmen round about refuse to enter a public-house where "Robberts' beer" was sold, but the pitmen's wives drove back home the tradesmen's carts that travelled round the pit villages laden with provisions. Dr. Trotter himself described the state of affairs in a letter I received from him a few days after the appearance of the "Hubbubboo." It will be seen that the letter was partly in reply to a suggestion of mine that nothing foolish or indiscreet should be done to bring discredit upon the movement. Here, then, is Dr. Trotter's account of matters :—

BEDLINGTON, THURSDAY.

MY DEAR SIR,—The whole district is in a blaze. The tradesmen of Morpeth are like to be ruined. A great meeting was held at Morpeth, on Tuesday night, to take the crisis into serious consideration. A reward of £150 is offered by the tradesmen for the publishers and authors of the squibs which are setting the miners into so desperate a state of excitement. All the inns and beer-shops in the district have orders to receive no more ale or spirits from Morpeth on pain of instant extinction, and all here have complied with the demand. The pitmen made an entrance into every public-house, took down all the Morpeth spirit advertisements framed on the walls, trampled them underfoot, and sent the fragments to the owners carefully packed and labelled. You can have no idea of the sensation here at present. It is to be proposed, and has every likelihood of being carried unanimously, that Choppington pits be at once laid idle should a single tubful of coals be sent to the town of Morpeth, and every colliery in the county is to be invited to join issue to the same effect. So you see that Morpeth people will not only be starved as regards food, but as respects fuel also, if things go on at this rate much longer. I believe we could have 10,000 men into Morpeth at a week's notice. However, I will follow your advice in the matter and keep things as quiet as possible ; but if the men get determined, the devil himself will hardly be able to prevent them making an inroad. I will excuse our deputation to the collieries to which we were invited as you suggest. Besides, Mr. Burt will as surely be M.P. for the borough of Morpeth as that I am very sincerely yours,

JAMES TROTTER.

The shopkeepers of Morpeth were indeed in serious straits. In this extremity they got up a meeting to repudiate the "Hubbubboo." Peace, however, was not restored till the Franchise Association was invited to hold a conference in the sacred precincts of the borough itself. It was suspected at the time, though it was not positively known till long afterwards, that the poem which set the district on fire was the production, not of an enemy, but of a friend. Things were getting dull, it was thought, and so it was deemed advisable to invent something that would fan the embers of the agitation into a blaze. And the blaze produced then has certainly never in the same district been equalled since. Dr. Trotter was fond of practical jokes, and the "Hubbubboo" was one of them—quite of a piece with another which set the inhabitants of his own town of Dalry by the ears.

The franchise movement never flagged after the excitement about the "Hubbubboo." It even attracted attention in distant parts of the country. Archibald Forbes, in an interval of his war reporting, was sent down to describe for the *Daily News* the position of matters in the North. Writing of a "Miners' Monster Demonstration," held at Morpeth on September 28, 1872, he fell into a curious confusion in respect to a leading spirit of the movement, assigning to him the name of the colliery village in which he resided. One of the speakers at the meeting, said Mr. Forbes, was "an Irish pitman, Thomas Glassey, known to fame as the Choppington Guide Post"—"a fine, ardent young fellow, with yellow hair, and a brogue broader than the platform. And then," he added, "Mr. Glassey lapsed into revolutionary utterances, and began to talk about tyrants and despots and other matters of a like sort, which seemed to indicate him as rather an unsafe guide post for Choppington or any other loyal community." But the upshot of the whole business was that the revising barrister, when he came his rounds in 1873, admitted the whole of the pitman claimants to the franchise, thus increasing the constituency of Morpeth at one bound from 2,661 to 4,916.

"The rest was easy. Sir George Grey, the Home Secretary in many successive Whig Ministries, who had represented Morpeth since 1853, retired into private life. Mr. Cowen presided over a great meeting at Bedlington Cross on October 18, 1873, at which a requisition was presented to Mr. Burt inviting him to stand as a candidate for the borough. The invitation was, of course, accepted. A committee was chosen to conduct the election, and although the return of Mr. Burt by an overwhelming majority was absolutely certain, a rival candidate was found in Major Francis Duncan, who, as Colonel Duncan, the author of a "History of the Royal Artillery," rose to distinction both in Parliament and in the military service, and died later while serving his country in Egypt.

In the unique contest which followed, meetings were frequently enlivened by Mr. Robert Elliott's recitation of his poem, "The Pitman Gan te Parlemint," which spread over the counties of Northumberland and Durham much as Edwin Waugh's "Come Whoam to the Childer an' Me" spread

over Lancashire and the Midlands about twenty years earlier. The author was then a coal-miner. In later years he went out to Western Australia to join his brother, and was there sufficiently successful to make it possible for him to spend a quiet and contented old age at Low Fell, near Gateshead, where he now resides. There are pitmen in Northumberland who believe to this day that no poem comparable to "The Pitman Gan te Parlemint" was ever written. Here are some samples of it:—

Wey, lads, just keep order a bit, de ye see,
 An' hear what maw marra's been sayin to me;
 He says, Robbit guess what's been rumoured aboot;
 But it's hardly worth while, for thoo cannot, I doot.
 Wey, the rumours just this. A greet man they ca' Grey,
 Thit's been member for Morpith for monny a lang day—
 They ca' him Sir George, man—ye know who aw mean;
 He's a chap often menshuned along wi' the Queen—
 Noo, wor fokes hae kuncluded thit he winna de,
 So they want Tommy Burt for to be their M.P.;
 A man thit they know, an' a man thit thor sure
 Winnit easely furget to luik efter the poor;
 For Tommy, ye know's but a poor man hissell,
 An' wha like a poor man oor trubbles kin tell?
 The rich fokes kin niver describe them se weel,
 Because thor not paintin' the thing that they feel,
 An' Tommy, beside, hes a heed full iv nolige,
 Tho' niver obtained at a skule nor a collige;
 But gleaned out iv buiks as at neet he wad sit,
 Often efter a weary day's wark at the pit.
 Noo, he hes a headpiece! Man, faith, thor is nowt
 But he kens a' aboot. He can talk aboot owt.
 An' then such a reetir! Ye know, with the pen
 Thit Tommy's a chep thit's been second to nene.
 He's not like some cheps wi' a greet deal o' jaw,
 Altho' it's but little or nothin', they know;
 Becaws he's not furward—in fack he is blate,
 Kuncidern the nolige he hes in his pate.
 He's a man we respec' for his sense an' his worth;
 He's the King o' the Howkies an' pride o' the North,
 An' the papers confess thit thor cudden well be
 For a lot o' bowld Howkies a better M.P.
 Naw we want and we'll hev him sent up without doot,
 To tell thor greet fokes what wor thinkin' aboot;
 To tell them wor thinkin' the money thit's spent
 Shud get a reduction iv 50 per cent.;

An' thit them rich paupers thit's paid to de nowt,
Shud nobbit get paid for the wark that they've rowt ;
Or to put the thing plainly, if not varry nice,
Thit we'll keep ne mair cats than we want to catch mice.

.

An' Tommy must let the big wigs understand,
What us Howkies are thinkin' concernin' the land.
He mun say the weyst land mun be made to produce
Whate'er belly timer we want for war use ;
And that aw the hares an' the fesants they keep,
Shud teyk thorsels off te meyk room for some sheep ;
Becaws its not reet to lay weyst an estate,
When thousands o' poor foke are wantin' thor bate.

.

Wey, lads, aw just think hoo the biggins will stare
When into St. Stephen's a Howkie gans there !
Ah, man, they will glower, an' ne doot thor is sum
Will conclude thit the end o' creashun is cum.
They will watch him, nae doot, wiv a curious gaze,
An' tek stock of his visage, tek stock of his claes ;
Just as if he had come frae some far away place,
An' belanged to some savage, untemable race.
They may think thit he's quiet ; but, faith they'll sune know
Thit Tommy's the boy thit kin talk to them a' ;
An' though he's a Howkie, he'll show them he can
Discuss wi' the wisest, behave like a man ;
An' thit, if ye luik in the papers ye'll see,
Is mair than a vast o' the biggins kin de.

The poem was, perhaps, a little rough in structure and crude in sentiment ; but it "caught on" like a fire on a prairie. A few weeks after Mr. Burt was returned as member for Morpeth there was a demonstration at Shadon's Hill, a renowned place for miners' meetings, overlooking Lambton Castle and, in all directions, many a mile of the Durham coal-field. Here Mr. Elliott was distributing copies of his poem to eager applicants when he was pulled off the waggon on which he stood, and his whole bundle of broad-sheets was torn from him and scrambled for by the crowd.

This, however, is to anticipate. Mr. Burt had many meetings to address in the centres of population in the borough of Morpeth before this meeting at Shadon's Hill, which he

attended as one of the first members returned to the new Parliament. His speeches were admittedly of unusual excellence, and one of them, delivered at Bedlington on January 3, 1874, gave a memorable phrase to political controversy. "If there are any Conservative working men——" he was saying, when he was interrupted by a cry of, "There are none!" "Unfortunately there are," he continued; "but they are very scarce, and we need not be afraid of them. The Conservative working man is either a fool or a flunkey."

XII

THE MORPETH ELECTION OF 1874

CHAPTER XII

THE MORPETH ELECTION OF 1874

NOT before nor since, it may be confidently said, has there been such a Parliamentary election as that which took place at Morpeth in the early days of February, 1874. It was an election distinguished, not as was anticipated in some quarters, by unseemly and violent proceedings, but by frank, and even rollicking, good-humour, by the more than courteous relations of the two candidates, and by the almost boundless delight of the new electors in their admission to political power. At all elections the miners of Northumberland are distinguished by their good behaviour. They take their politics seriously. They regard the vote as something too precious to play tricks with. "I never came across finer gentlemen in my life," remarked one of Mr. Charles Fenwick's opponents, just after the electors of the Wansbeck division had given him a more than commonly sound beating. It was in the Morpeth election of 1874 that these grand characteristics first exhibited themselves.

But before describing what took place in the famous old market town which has now been so long represented by Mr. Burt, it is necessary, in the interests of orderly narrative, that other matters should be referred to. And first of all as to the position of the venerable Sir George Grey. It is not to be supposed that after his many years of service he was being set aside by the new electors. He had, some time before the selection of Mr. Burt as a candidate, spoken of his intention of resigning his seat at the next General Election, on the ground of advancing age. The actual

notification of his retirement was made on the day before Mr. Burt's candidature was announced. The way was clear, therefore, for the selection of a successor, and the Liberal electors, new and old, were unanimous in their choice. There were 4,916 names on the register, and more than 3,500 of these were attached to a requisition presented to Mr. Burt, begging him to place himself at the disposal of the constituency. The requisition is still preserved, a dusty relic, a bundle of rolls of foolscap, by County Alderman Fairbairn, of Bedlington, Mr. Burt's contemporary as a coal-miner, and one of the oldest of his surviving friends.

So far the proposed candidate had himself stood outside the whole movement. He was still of opinion that he could be more useful in the North than at Westminster, and he therefore remained a passive observer of events, allowing matters to drift, to employ his own phrase. But there could be no more drifting after the 18th of October, 1873. He had been invited to attend a meeting to be held on that date at Bedlington, and out of doors. Mr. Joseph Cowen, shortly himself to become a member of Parliament, presided over this assembly, memorable in the history of Parliamentary representation. Mr. Cowen was then as powerful a political influence in Northumberland and Durham as was Mr. Chamberlain in the Midlands. His two newspapers, the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* and the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, went, one or the other, into every miner's cottage in the two counties. He was at that time a pronounced friend of the pitmen. Nobody had been more enthusiastic in aiding the movement to get their names put on the register. He was, besides, one of those rare orators of whom there are not more than two or three in a century. To the miners he spoke with an intonation that they understood, in a garb differing not greatly from their own "Sunday best," and in words so idiomatic that they could all be understood without mental worry. He said at Bedlington that he never remembered having attended any public meeting with more pleasure than the one over which he then presided. There can be no doubt of his sincerity. He was then, and for some

years thereafter, Mr. Burt's close friend and ardent admirer. As substantial proof of his desire to see a miners' member in Parliament, he put down the sum of £100 towards the election expenses.

The requisition to Mr. Burt, signed, as has been said, by a very large majority of the electors, expressed the opinion that the time had arrived when the labouring classes should have their interests directly represented in Parliament, and as a Liberal and a representative of labour the secretary of the Miners' Association was asked to allow himself to be nominated, as soon as an opportunity should occur, for the ancient borough of Morpeth. The recipient of the requisition now felt himself peremptorily called upon to surrender his own disinclination to Parliamentary life, and, replying in a speech which was singularly clear, firm, and far-seeing, he said :—

“It is chiefly because you recognise in me the representative of a principle ; because you want the exclusive barriers which have hitherto kept poor men out of the House of Commons, and made that House ‘a rich man’s club,’ broken down and swept away ; it is because you want labour, which has so long been trodden down and scorned, even by those who owe everything to it ; it is because you want it exalted to its proper position, and recognised even in the highest places of the nation—it is chiefly because of these considerations that you have asked me to come forward as representative on your behalf. Here I am, in entire sympathy with you, and after mature reflection I have resolved to place myself at your disposal. In response to the requisition, signed by a large majority of the electors, feeling assured of their earnest support, and of the sympathy of the great mass of the working population of Northumberland, I throw aside my personal feelings, and declare that I am ready to face every difficulty, and, on behalf of labour and Radical politics, to contest the representation of the borough of Morpeth against all comers.”

Northumberland miners, like Newcastle grindstones, according to a not too reliable proverb, are to be found

all over the world, and one of them wrote from as far away as Streator, Illinois, a letter which ought to be given here, for the writer, Joseph L. Fairbairn, the brother of the Andrew Fairbairn already mentioned, had known Mr. Burt from childhood to manhood, perhaps more intimately than any other of his friends. He was killed, in 1887, by a gas explosion in an American coal-mine, when he had gone down to make things safer for the men who would soon have followed, and who might have lost their own lives. The letter which he wrote on hearing of Mr. Burt's selection as candidate for Morpeth was in these terms :—

I enclose a cheque for £1 towards the election expenses of Mr. Thomas Burt. Wishing to thank those brave fellows, Mr. James Trotter, Mr. Robert Elliott, Mr. Thomas Glassey, and others, for the good work they are manfully doing, I think it to be the best way to do so by sending in my mite, hoping that they may attain the object for which they have all so manfully laboured, and believing as I do that the borough of Morpeth contains no better man than Mr. Burt to represent its interests honestly and ably. When I say thus much I may say that it is with no slight knowledge that I speak of Mr. Burt. There has been so much said of him that it would almost seem folly of me to say more. One thing, however, I cannot but refer to—that is, the fear that some men seem to have that he will be abashed by that august assembly, the House of Commons. They know little of Mr. Burt who have any such fears. Under that modest and retiring disposition of his there beats a heart brave enough to stand before any assembly in the world. He has had strength enough to stand before the coal kings of the North of England, not only to hold his own with them, but to gain their respect. I feel certain that he will not do less in the Commons House of Parliament.

There was to be a much less interval between the Bedlington meeting and the General Election than was at first anticipated. A dissolution of Parliament came about at the beginning of 1874. Oddly enough, Mr. Joseph Cowen, Mr. Burt's chairman, was, as we now know, one of the main factors in bringing that event to pass. He was elected as member for Newcastle, on the death of his father, late in 1873, but with a much lower majority than his father had been able to secure. All through the year the Government had been losing seats, and this was, in familiar speech, "the last straw that broke the camel's back." A cartoon pub-

lished at the time represented Mr. Cowen as "The Blaydon Brick"—he was a brickmaker, by the way—walking up to St. Stephen's with his writ in his hand, and Mr. Gladstone closing the door in his face. There was as much truth as humour in this piece of political lampooning. Mr. Cowen was, in fact, the last man elected to the famous Parliament of 1868, and he was elected too late to take his seat in it. Then came the surprise dissolution, with the famous Morpeth contest as one of its consequences.

Mr. Burt's address was already before the electors. It was an address advocating what were then considered to be extreme Radical views. It demanded the equalisation of the borough and county franchise, a redistribution of seats, manhood suffrage, a large amendment of the labour laws, unsectarian education, the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church, national retrenchment, a thorough reform of the land laws, the abolition of the game laws, and licensing legislation on the lines of local option. To this extensive programme Mr. Burt, in his speeches, added Home Rule for Ireland, thus anticipating the Home Rule Bill by more than a dozen years. The address said, on the subject of Labour legislation :—

Since the laws of the country have in the past been made almost exclusively by employers and capitalists, many of them bear very oppressively and unjustly on the working classes. Among enactments of this character may be mentioned the Master and Servant Act, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, and the Law of Conspiracy. The 14th clause of the first of these measures empowers magistrates to imprison workmen for three months with hard labour for breaches of contract. I am in favour of the total repeal of this clause. The Criminal Law Amendment Act ought also to be repealed. The common law of assault, in my opinion, meets all the requirements of justice, and should apply to trade union disturbers of the peace as well as to other members of the community. The Law of Conspiracy requires to be more strictly defined, so as to prevent the recurrence of such a case of glaring wrong as that which was committed in the imprisonment of the five gas stokers.

The case of the gas stokers made a great stir in its time, but the circumstances surrounding it must be almost wholly unknown to the present generation. Briefly, Lord Justice

Brett had sent five men to prison for twelve months because they had been found guilty of a "conspiracy" to coerce or molest their employers by preparing for a simultaneous withdrawal of their labour. That is to say that the mere intention to strike, even if the legal notice to terminate work was given, was treated as a crime. This monstrous decision was arrived at in December, 1872, so that the facts were still fresh in the minds of all trade unionists. Mr. Burt's declarations on this subject, and the other points of the labour programme of that day, awakened the attention of the whole trade union world, so that even in the turmoil of a General Election the Morpeth contest was followed with something approaching to national interest. To return, however, to the address in which the demands of labour at that time were so simply and tersely stated. It concluded with these words :—

You shall have ample opportunities, so far as I can give them, of hearing my political opinions fully and plainly set forth, and of judging whether my views on all the great questions of the day are in harmony with yours. If, after these explanations, you should deem me worthy of your confidence, I shall do my utmost to deserve the honour you have invited me to claim. If not, I shall again retire to the obscurity of private life with even greater readiness than I have now, at the request of 3,500 electors, emerged from it.

Major Duncan, Mr. Burt's opponent, was making his first plunge into politics, and with the slightest possible amount of preparation. Of some pleasant features of the contest Mr. Holyoake writes : "Mr. Burt was opposed by Major Duncan, who was a civil, pleasant-spoken Tory. The miners went to all his meetings as impartially as to Mr. Burt's. Where they could agree with the Major they cheered ; where they could not they were courteously silent." The courtesies of the occasion went much beyond this, as a matter of fact. The two candidates addressed each other's meetings, and even drove round the constituency together. It was a sort of arm-in-arm contest, where there was a rivalry in good feeling as well as in political opinion. After one of Major Duncan's speeches, to which there had

not been a murmur of opposition, though almost the whole audience consisted of pitmen, it was proposed "that a vote of thanks be given to Major Duncan for his lecture," and the motion was carried unanimously, and with applause. On another occasion the audience seemed so friendly and approving that it was considered safe to move a vote of confidence in the Conservative candidate. Almost the only hands held up in its favour were those of the proposer and seconder. Major Duncan was bewildered. "What do you mean?" he asked. "You cheer my speech, and then you vote against me to a man." "We like ye weel enough," was the reply; "but we're gan to vote for Tommy Bort." On the day of the polling both candidates went round the villages of the constituency. "Mr. Burt's tour was a triumphal procession," writes his friend, Mr. W. E. Adams. "The arrival of the candidate and his friends at Bedlington, I recollect, led to an extraordinary scene. The main street of the town was crowded, for, of course, the pits were all idle. First there was much cheering. Then arose an irrepressible desire to do something unusual. The horses were taken out of the conveyance; dozens of stalwart miners seized the shafts, and the electoral party was rushed up and down the thoroughfare at a furious and hazardous pace, amidst the wildest excitement. It was even proposed to run the carriage all the way to Morpeth; nor was it without some difficulty that the jubilant crowd was dissuaded from its purpose. Not less astonishing was the reception accorded to Mr. Burt at Morpeth itself, where both candidates—such was the friendly character of the contest—addressed the multitude, which literally filled the Market Place, from the same platform and from the windows of each other's committee rooms!"

When the Hon. Hedworth Lambton was badly beaten at Newcastle many years later he sent such a frolicsome message to his friends as might have befitted the case of Major Duncan. On the occasion of a General Election in which the Liberal party was smashed to pieces in most parts of the country the Conservative candidate at Morpeth

polled only 585 votes. The votes recorded for Mr. Burt fell only a little short of the number of signatures to the requisition presented some months before the contest. They amounted to 3,332. Thus triumphantly, with drums beating and flags flying, was the first indisputable working man elected to the British House of Commons.

In their "History of Trade Unionism" Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb, writing of the Labour candidatures of 1874, of which there were thirteen, state that at Stafford and Morpeth "the official Liberals accepted what they were powerless to prevent; and Messrs. Alexander MacDonald and Thomas Burt, the two leading officials of the National Union of Miners, became the first 'Labour members' of the House of Commons." It is beyond question that the official Liberals could have done nothing whatever to prevent the election of Mr. Burt; but it is less than just to suggest that they endeavoured or desired to do anything to prevent it. Mr. Burt was recognised by them, as by all others, as the Liberal candidate for Morpeth, and there was neither opposition on one side nor defiance on the other. Mr. Burt was, in fact, elected as Liberal member.

XIII

THE FEAST AFTER THE FRAY



CHAPTER XIII

THE FEAST AFTER THE FRAY

IT was inevitable that a victory so brilliant and conclusive as that of Mr. Burt should be celebrated by a banquet of some sort, and a banquet there was at Morpeth, in the early days of March, 1874. It was a banquet that had several original features. In the first place it was lacking in the usual accompaniment of fermented liquors. And as there was no "drink" there were no toasts. A public meeting followed what was described by the newspapers as "an excellent repast." But the most remarkable feature of the celebration was the presence of Major Duncan, the defeated candidate. It is to be doubted whether, at the conclusion of the election of 1874, any man in England took his beating so cheerfully and in so fine a spirit as this manly, earnest, and capable English soldier.

Robert Elliott, the poet of the contest, was in the chair, and the speech with which he opened the proceedings is not without historic interest. They had met, he said, to celebrate the return of the first veritable working man to the British House of Commons. They had struck a blow at snobbery and sham respectability. The miners of the North of England—of England generally—had been looked down upon and despised by the other classes of society; but they might depend upon it that in the future they would be looked up to with greater respect. When they began their agitation at Bedlington they were told that they had no more right to the franchise than the pit ponies; and a gentleman whom they had consulted had

told them that unless they paid £10 rent they were altogether outside the pale of the Constitution. But these were some of the middle-class dignitaries with whom they had come in contact. They knew very well that it was a difficult work indeed to send a working man to Parliament. The difficulty was that there had been in the past so much jealousy and so much envy amongst the working men themselves. When one of their number had been proposed for a seat in Parliament, or for any dignified position, they had generally found plenty who imagined themselves quite as well qualified as the person proposed for the honour. There was no doubt that this had been the wreck of many a scheme of that description. However, he was happy to say that in the enterprise in which they had been engaged they had been almost entirely free from any difficulty of the kind to which he referred, and they had co-operated with a unanimity that was something wonderful, and which their friend, Major Duncan, he remarked, with a friendly glance at that gentleman, could scarcely account for.

There followed a speech from Mr. Thomas Glassey, in later years, as has been remarked, a far from undistinguished politician in Australia. He moved: "That we congratulate Mr. Burt on the honourable position to which he has attained as member for Morpeth, and wish him every success in his new sphere of action." While, he said, they were proud of their position as a constituency, they were equally proud that one of their own class, and especially such an individual as Mr. Burt, had been raised to the honourable position of member for the borough. The return of Mr. Burt established a new principle; in fact, it opened a new era in the history of the representation of the country. The opinion had hitherto prevailed that unless a man was wealthy and of high social position, he was altogether unqualified to represent any constituency in Parliament. But they held that whether a man was wealthy or not, so long as he had brain and intellect, a knowledge of social and political questions, and a desire to do justice to his kind and his class, he had superior qualifications

to the man of money and of high social position. He certainly thought that they had a right to be proud that on the first occasion of their exercising the franchise there had been such a good feeling displayed, not only between the rival candidates, but between the rival parties of the borough.

In a speech delivered after the poll, Major Duncan had remarked that the contest had been one of sentiment, and not of politics. The suggestion was that Mr. Burt had been returned by the admiration felt for him by the miners rather than on political grounds. This was combated by the speaker who seconded Mr. Glassey's resolution, and who expressed the frank opinion that Morpeth was one of the most intelligent constituencies in the North of England. He proceeded to prove his case by saying that at one polling booth in the Bedlington district, out of six hundred men who recorded their votes there was only one illiterate, "and even this voter," he added, "under such men as Mr. Glassey and Mr. Elliott"—both of them working miners, it may be necessary to repeat—"would, by the time of the next election, be educated and up to the mark." Mr. Burt's first speech as member of Parliament, with the exception of those delivered immediately after the close of the poll, was in these terms:—

I am not sorry that circumstances are not favourable to my delivering a long speech to-night. I have had a glance at the chairman's programme, and—I do not know whether or not I am letting out a secret—I find that there are sixteen speakers to follow, and that they have only about sixteen minutes in which to deliver their speeches. Had it not been so, there are a few things that I should have liked to have referred to. The circumstances are certainly peculiar. The contest has been very properly described as a "model" one, and undoubtedly it has been singular in many respects. It has been singular on account of the good temper with which it has been conducted. You have given Major Duncan and myself our share of the credit arising from that, but I believe it was due very much indeed to the manner in which my esteemed friend—I cannot call him my opponent—entered upon the contest. There was the significant fact that I came forward at the request of a very large number of the electors. My friend Mr. Glassey stated that I did not canvass a single elector. Well, in the course of the contest it was represented to me by some persons that there were certain gentlemen who had expressed a wish that I should wait upon them; and I was told that if I would merely call upon them they would be

sure to give me their votes. I said, "I have come forward not on my own account; I have come forward at the request of the electors. I mean to put it fairly to the test, and to see whether they want me or not." I added, "My friends have worked very hard, and I should be very sorry on their account not to see this movement crowned with success; but dearly as I desire to win—having now entered into the contest—I would not call upon a single individual to solicit his vote, even at the risk of losing my election!" I felt so strongly upon this subject that I really took up that position; but I believe it is due in a great measure to my having taken up that position that I was returned by such an overwhelming majority at the head of the poll.

It has been questioned whether I am a working man or not, and a good deal of interest has been taken in this question, even across the Channel, in France. I had a letter the other day asking me to communicate with a Frenchman who seems to be writing to a French newspaper. Indeed, I got the French newspaper. It was all French—French from beginning to end. Still I managed to spell out a long article on the Morpeth election, and, on the whole, a favourable account it gave—that is, if you can depend upon my French. But this Frenchman wanted me to write to prove that I am a working man. Well, as he had attempted to do me a good turn I felt very unwilling not to do the best I could to accommodate him, and I set about writing the letter. I told him I doubted whether a letter from me could prove that I was a working man, and I said I did not know whether I should be regarded as a *de facto* working man, and that I cared very little whether I am regarded as such or not—very little indeed. It is a matter of very minor importance. "But," I added, "I will just give you a few facts in connection with my history and leave you to look at the facts and draw your inferences. My father was a miner—he was the son of a miner. He worked in the pits until he was compelled by ill-health to leave them. I was born in a colliery village. I lived in a colliery house all my life up to about nine years ago. I commenced to work underground myself at ten years of age. I never intended, nine years ago, never anticipated, that I would be anything else than a working miner."

Some of you may remember the circumstances under which I left the mines. It was at the request of the miners of this district that I left the mines to take charge of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confidence Association, of which I am now secretary. You are all aware, I dare say—at least some of you are aware—that I left the pit with some reluctance, because I really believed that, taking all in all, a working man who is able to work has every chance of happiness. He is as a rule quite as happy as the lord that lives in his palace. Now, I never felt that there was anything degrading connected with coal-hewing. I hope none of you do. I thought it was a very manly thing to go and face the "coal wall" and honestly work for my bread, for the maintenance of myself and family. I told the Frenchman these facts, and then went on to say that it was clear that, as I was at present situated, I was rather remote from the coal face, but that if I came to be thrown out of a situation, and that there did not present itself to me a mode of gaining a livelihood equally honest and equally independent, I should go back and take the "picks" again.

Well, it seems perhaps rather a minor consideration whether one is a working man or not. I should like, however, while touching upon this subject, to see the working men themselves broaden their views, and regard not merely the manual labourers as the working men, but regard the great brain workers, to whom we are so much beholden, as equally with themselves comprising a part of the working-class population of the country. But to leave these smaller considerations, and to go to the greater questions that are before us at the present time. Mr. Disraeli, you would see, made a reference to Mr. MacDonald and myself in a rather complimentary way. Well, now, Mr. Disraeli is a man from whom I have no objection at all to receive a compliment. He is a genius; he is a man of superb intellectual ability; he is a statesman; he has written his name imperishably in the history of his country; but I should have appreciated the compliment much more highly if Mr. Disraeli had not at the same time, in paying it, struck a blow at men who are equally worthy with Mr. MacDonald and myself. The only difference between these men and Mr. MacDonald and myself is that we have been successful and they have not. It looks so very much like worshipping success that I am very sorry Mr. Disraeli referred to us if he could not do so without striking a blow at men who are quite as worthy as ourselves. I thank you for the manner in which you have received me, and I trust that any ill-feelings that may have been engendered in this contest will be swept away entirely, and that we shall go forth into the great battle of life a united and determined people.

Major Duncan's speech, in reply to a resolution which said, "That we desire to express our approval of the courteous and gentlemanly bearing of our opponent, Major Duncan, during the late contest, and we trust that the example set by both parties will be largely followed elsewhere," was so friendly and delightful as to suggest regret that Morpeth was not a two-member constituency, so that he and Mr. Burt might have been returned together. He was in rather a hot place, he said, glancing round the platform; but he could assure them that it had been with great pleasure that he had come a long distance to throw his mite into the treasury of honour that they were that night according the newly elected representative of the borough of Morpeth—his successful and esteemed rival—and although in that treasury there might be coins nobler to look at, and with a nobler superscription, there would be none with a more genuine ring than his. And this he said, he thanked God, with all sincerity, although he differed from Mr. Burt in politics, and should be glad to fight him

again the next day. He confessed that he was that night embarrassed by the conflicting claims of duty and of inclination. His duty to his party would compel him to turn the key in the door, and talk politics to them until he got them all round; but when he thought of the weeping faces that he would see as, one by one, commencing with Mr. Burt, they came round from the Liberal to the Conservative camp, his heart failed him and he resolved to stick to inclination instead of to a sense of duty. His inclination that night happened to coincide with theirs. It was to do honour to one to whom honour was due. The words of the resolution, and the way in which the proposition had been received, compelled him to make allusion to the manner in which the contest had been carried out. He took it that Mr. Burt and himself had separated the man from his politics, and had believed that a man might be a good man and yet differ in political opinion. Well, with all these differences it had not been at all impossible to have a perfectly friendly and courteous intercourse, and, as it had turned out, a perfect and lasting friendship. The whole way in which he had been received by them had made an impression on his mind he never could forget. Had he been their own candidate instead of their opponent he could not have been received more kindly. The only instance of bad taste was on the terrible Thursday when they voted all one way.

A few words only about Mr. Burt himself before he sat down, he observed. In the army there was a custom which had crept in of late, that after a battle a Victoria Cross was frequently sent to a regiment, and it was left to the men to choose who should be the recipient of it. This method of giving this honour through the channel of men who best knew who was deserving of it must carry with it increased value to the brave man who received it. Now, Mr. Burt had come out of the battle to which allusion had been made as the great battle of life—he meant that battle where they found stout enemies, enemies such as slander, envy, and uncharitableness. He had routed them all, and this great cross which he had got, in the form of a seat in the House of Commons, for

them, had been given to him by those who best knew him. Therefore, even if Mr. Burt had failed, this choice of him by those who best knew him was in itself an honour. Tennyson, in his ode written on the death of the Prince Consort, spoke of "the fierce light that beats upon a throne, deeping each blot." He was going, however, to differ from Tennyson, and say, the fiercer light of constant daily intercourse that beats upon a man's character, detecting every fault and disclosing every crevice. And Mr. Burt had come through this also, and had been chosen by the people among whom he lived to represent them in Parliament. If they had had the good taste to choose himself, he said with a smile, they would have taken something on trust—and he hoped that trust would not have been abused—but they had chosen instead one who had lived amongst them, and of whom they knew everything, and he thought that was an honour beyond all compare. When Mr. Burt went to Parliament he would go as the "child of many hopes." It was not in the nature of things that hopes could be entirely fulfilled; but he was confident that if there were any disappointments it would not be due to want of courage or endurance on the part of their representative. He frankly wished him good luck. That Mr. Burt would be successful in the House of Commons he fervently hoped; that he would be upright and honourable in it he positively knew.

This was a noble and generous speech, the high qualities of which were not reflected in the public utterances of some of Major Duncan's supporters. The return of Mr. Burt was, in truth, a bitter experience for the Conservative party in the borough of Morpeth to endure, and much of the bitterness found expression in words. There was a banquet to Major Duncan himself, to which the new member was not invited. The clergy of the district were in the ascendant on that occasion, and they gave rein to their tongues. They talked, in particular, of taking in hand the political education of the miners, probably without thinking at the moment how they had neglected their spiritual education for years past. What the miners thought of this kind of discourse may be guessed

from the following verses, sent by a young pitman, Marshall Creswell, to the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* :—

Mr. Jones, in reply tiv a toast frae the chairman,
 Thowt pitmen might be eddykated in mind
 Ti forsyeck Mr. Burt, which waddn't be fair, man,
 For ti put in the Major wad shoor be unkind.
 Shud he put up agyen at next general elekshin,
 We'll reat him wi' kindness, the best we can show;
 But wor awn canny Burt will, shoor, find protekshin
 Agyen all new comers, how high or how low.
 So, ye men o' the sorplis, that wants reformashin,
 Try ye, forst of all, public-hooses ti close,
 An' de yor awn sels what's becomin' yor stashin,
 An' yor heerors will nivvor try ye to oppose.
 So, noo ti conclude and ti finish maw letter,
 Tyek advice frev an ignorant, working pit-lad:
 Tyek the beem frae yor awn eye, an' then ye'll see better;
 Ye'll find that the mote i' wors isn't se bad.
 Success ti Tom Glassey, James Trotter, and Ellyitt;
 May they be rewarded for what they hev dyun!
 Fellow workmen, de likewise, an' ne one may tell yit
 But thor'll be mair Tommy Burts sent ti Parlymint syun.

XIV

FIRST APPEARANCE IN PARLIAMENT

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FIRST APPEARANCE IN PARLIAMENT

THOMAS BURT was now, in his thirty-seventh year, a member of Parliament, the first of the now almost numerous class of direct representatives of labour. None of his portraits of that date represent him as he was. They place before us, with photographic accuracy, the finely arched eyebrows, the high, broad forehead, shaped like a dome, the thin, sensitive nostrils ; but, being photographs, they convey a wholly misleading idea of the "tone" of his features, making him a dark man, whereas his then fairly abundant hair and long beard were of a yellowish brown, accompanied by a complexion of the kind called sanguine. It is commonly said that the camera cannot lie, yet it is constantly lying, inasmuch as it represents yellow, and red, and a tone between these two, as if they were black. The portrait which is placed as frontispiece to this volume was painted in 1906, and was exhibited on the line in the Royal Academy of that year. Its subject was then recovering from a serious illness ; and though this is apparent, the portrait is undisputably characteristic and true.

In appearance and manner Mr. Burt, at the time of his election to the House of Commons, corresponded in no single particular to what was then the popular idea of the labour leader. There was absolutely nothing boisterous about him. So far from being loud or self-assertive, he was gentle, retiring, and greatly disinclined to make speeches ; from which it must not be inferred, however, that he was a timid or shrinking man. On the contrary, he had a large

reserve of quiet resoluteness and self-possession. One was struck at once by his compactness of mind and body. There was in each a fine combination of delicacy and strength. Frankness, clear-mindedness, firmness of conviction based on knowledge and intense thought, a power of expressing his views with precision and lucidity, without verbiage, but always with the use of "the right word"—these were qualities which distinguished him no less at that time than they have done in his subsequent career.

It was necessary, of course, to make some new financial arrangement before he could face the expense of living in London. His salary, as secretary of the Northumberland miners, had always been on the frugal scale. It never exceeded £3 per week, and when he consented to become a candidate for the representation of Morpeth it was about £150 a year. The miners now proposed to raise this to £500. This sum Mr. Burt continued to receive until 1888, when there was severe depression of the coal trade, and he voluntarily reduced his own salary by £100. In his excellent work on "England: its People, Polity, and Pursuits," Mr. T. H. S. Escott observes that "a country gentleman with £5,000 a year, a family, and a town house, who goes into the House of Commons determined to make politics a study, finds it not too easy to keep out of debt." What Mr. Burt undertook was to solve the problem of how to keep out of debt, as a member of Parliament, on £500 a year. When, on the formation of the Rosebery Government, in 1892, he became Parliamentary Secretary of the Board of Trade, he wholly relinquished his salary from the Miners' Association, whilst continuing to be its faithful servant as before—a fact which leads me to insert here, as finding its most appropriate place in a setting forth of the financial position, which need not again be mentioned, an act of self-sacrifice which is now made known for the first time. When Sir Charles Dilke was President of the Local Government Board, in the early eighties, he offered Mr. Burt a Chief Inspectorship at a salary of £900 a year, rising to £1,000, with a pension on retirement. "I was specially anxious in this case," writes Sir Charles to me,

"to find an administrator who could start the working of a new Act in such a way as to obtain the confidence both of the employed and the employers." When the offer was made to Mr. Burt, tempting as it must have been, as an arrangement that would relieve him from all further anxieties about money throughout his whole lifetime, it was at once very gratefully but firmly declined, and solely on the ground that the member for Morpeth remained true to his old determination to let nothing come between himself and the Northumberland miners but their own desire to dispense with his services. This is one of those incidents that may be left without comment. It tells its own story.

It was not in any sense as a delegate that Mr. Burt went up to St. Stephen's. His position in this respect was one that was much discussed at the time, and he stated his own views regarding it with his usual force and clearness almost immediately before his election. In a speech made at Morpeth he said :—

"If by the term 'delegate' or 'representative' is meant that I shall always pay great heed to the views and opinions of my constituents I say that I am quite prepared to go as a delegate with that understanding. If, however, after having given the utmost attention to their views, after having studied them thoroughly, and finding my views are not in harmony with theirs, it is meant that I will sell my own birthright, so to speak, and vote and speak in favour of principles that I abhor, then certainly I am not going as a delegate. I believe that if a member of Parliament finds that his views are not in harmony with those of the electors he ought either to resign, or they ought to get rid of him as soon as possible ; but I believe that so long as he does represent them he ought to be true to himself. Above everything, he should never get upon his legs and profess to advocate views in which he does not believe, even at the bidding of his constituents ; and if I go to the House of Commons I need not say you may depend upon it that I shall always act upon my honest convictions."

There was much curiosity to see how the new miners'

member would acquit himself in the House. As Mr. Holyoake wrote : " Those who knew Mr. Burt had no misgiving. First, he had an honest voice, both a distinction and a recommendation there ; for in Parliament there are voices which have an accent of petty larceny in them, a peculiarity doubtless observable in other Parliaments besides the English. Second, Mr. Burt had unassumingness, a sense of relevance and decision of opinion, qualities which always command respect. He knew his own mind, and he had a mind to know. The House of Commons is for the truth on any question. It does not always make good use of the truth when it has it, but it has a preference for the truth, thinking, with the Roman commander—

Who tells me true, though in the tale lie death—
I hear him as he flattered.

So Parliament will always listen to a man who knows and is known to know. Mr. Burt, speaking only on questions he understood, and speaking with clearness and intelligence, soon rose in the respect and estimation of the House, which have increased from year to year."

His first speech was made on the 13th of May, 1874, when the new Parliament had been in existence for about four months. The subject was one which touched him with particular closeness. Sir George (then Mr.) Trevelyan had moved the second reading of his Household Franchise (Counties) Bill, a measure to which he was so devoted that he declined to join Mr. Gladstone's Government in order that he might promote its interests as a private member. " Mr. Gladstone," says Mr. John Morley, writing of the year 1873, " thought it impossible to take up the large subject of the county franchise, but they might encourage Mr. Trevelyan to come forward with it on an early day and give him all the help they could." When Mr. Trevelyan did come forward with it Mr. Disraeli was in power. Like the Minister in " The Devil's Walk," he had—

Gone up into a certain House
With a majority behind ;

and it was a big majority, too. However, the champion of the extension of the household franchise to the counties went undauntedly on with his Bill, and in Mr. Burt, who represented the constituency adjoining that in which he lived, he had a supporter of no common value. The member for Morpeth had followed a now forgotten politician named Salt, who moved "that the Bill be read a second time this day six months." That is to say that, as the House would not then be sitting, he moved the rejection of the measure. Mr. Burt's speech was modestly brief. In Hansard's verbatim report it extends to only 127 short lines, occupying about a page, and containing about 800 words. But it was a speech full of pith, as will be seen, stating the case for the Bill as it would affect the Northumberland miners with a most happy conciseness, and with illustrations that were new to the House of Commons. Mr. Burt said :—

"With the permission of the House I should like to say a very few words on this question. I would like to point out to the House that, whatever may be the case in other parts of the country, so far as the miners and working men of the North of England are concerned, they feel a very deep interest in the subject, and great dissatisfaction is felt at the present distinction between the borough and county franchise. In the two Northern counties of Northumberland and Durham there are about 50,000 adult miners. Of that number not more than 5,000 are voters, yet the 45,000 who are not voters are placed, in most respects, under entirely similar conditions to those who have votes. They occupy the same kind of houses, they follow the same kind of employment, and their social status and educational position are alike. They are, in fact, to all intents and purposes the same class of men, and they naturally feel considerable dissatisfaction that a certain number of them possess the right to vote and that others should be excluded from that right. The borough that I represent affords a more striking proof of this distinction than can be found in any other part of the country. The borough of Morpeth extends about ten miles, and is bounded by Morpeth on one side and Blyth on the other. It goes

through the chief part of the Northumberland coal-field ; it embraces some of the largest collieries in the county ; and very large bodies of colliers are excluded from the franchise simply from the fact that they live beyond—it may be only a few yards beyond—a privileged line. Now, Sir, the miners of Northumberland are a settled community ; they seldom remove out of the county. They do remove frequently from one colliery to another. Hence this state of things arises : A man may possess a vote one day and if he removes a few hundred yards he may lose his vote, just as much as if he went out of the country or to the Antipodes. We have this state of things also : Two men may be working—and they frequently are working—in the same pit and at the same place as ‘mates,’ and one of these may have a vote and the other may not. Their position is in every respect identical. They are occupying the same sort of house, and they are in exactly the same positions, only that one lives beyond ‘an imaginary line,’ as the hon. member for the Border Burghs called it. Now, Sir, I cannot conceive anything that tends more to create dissatisfaction than invidious distinctions between class and class ; but still more is that the case when distinctions are made between members of the same class, and I cannot command language strong enough to impress the House with the extreme dissatisfaction that exists on the part of those men on account of the anomalous position in which they are placed. I have heard a great deal about the danger of admitting so large a number of comparatively uneducated men to the franchise. Sir, I believe that the danger lies in excluding them, and there is nothing that is doing more at the present time to alienate the sympathies and the affections of the best and most intelligent of the working classes than these invidious and unnecessary distinctions, founded, as they are, on no principle of reason or common sense. I shall not trouble the House with many further remarks ; but I have heard it said since I came into this House, and by many persons outside of it, that there is a difficulty in getting the best portion of the working men to join the army and the militia. Well, Sir, I am secretary

of a very large working men's association, and more than once this very question has been under discussion, and resolutions have been passed to the effect that they will continue to refuse to join until they are recognised by the State as citizens of the country. They say, 'Why should we fight for the country that either dare not or will not trust or will not recognise us by giving us those common rights which are accorded to working men in other countries, where the people are not more law-abiding than we of the United Kingdom?' Though I do not advocate this change from party considerations, it would be untrue to profess that I am entirely indifferent to the result it might have on parties. I may say that, so far as the North of England is concerned, I think it is probable that it would not weaken the Liberal party to give the working men votes. But the Northern counties are not the whole of England, and if we may judge from what has taken place hitherto, the extension of the franchise has not always resulted in the strengthening of the Liberal party. I beg to thank the House very much for the attention with which it has listened to me."

Both Sir George Trevelyan and Mr. W. E. Forster praised the speech very highly, at the same time extending a welcome to the member who had made it. Said Mr. Forster: "The speech which had been made by a working-man representative, the hon. member for Morpeth, showed the advantage the House had gained by his entrance into it, and he should be glad if a larger proportion of working-men representatives of the country could bring their help to bear."

Mr. Burt addressed the House on a second occasion in the same year, but it was only for one pregnant minute. The subject under discussion was the allowance to be made to Prince Leopold, afterwards Duke of Albany, and the day on which the proposed grant was discussed was the 30th of July. The matter was one with which Mr. Burt was familiar, and on which he held decided views. He knew what the miners, who had listened to Charles Bradlaugh on such subjects on many and many an occasion, thought of the then frequent

applications to Parliament for Royal grants, and he begged to assure the House that there was a strong and very general and, as far as his experience went, a unanimous feeling against the passing of measures of this kind. In his opinion, it was desirable in the interests of the nation, and, he might perhaps add, in the interest of the Crown itself, that those repeated applications to the public purse for the maintenance of the Royal Family should by some means be put an end to. This was the enunciation, in a dozen words, of a policy which, not long afterwards, at the instance of Mr. Gladstone, and by means of a Conservative Government, became a settled part of the Constitution.

Shortly after the close of his first session, Mr. Burt spoke to his constituents with the most hearty appreciation of the manner in which he had been received in the House of Commons. In regard to himself, he said, there had been no superciliousness or snobbery. His impressions of the House were, in fact, almost wholly favourable. He credited his associates in Parliament with a certain earnestness of desire to deal equitably with the working classes. They were anxious to do right as far as they could see their way, he said, and to enter into the true feelings, and become acquainted with the real wishes, of the poorer population. But, he added, men who are chosen as ordinary members of Parliament are chosen, who have been accustomed to see life on its comfortable side, and who have no acquaintance with its hardships, have a certain natural incapacity to understand how the working classes are affected by Parliamentary measures. There was no sympathetic contact. Parliamentarians failed in their legislative efforts from a want of special knowledge of social conditions, and were unjust to the great body of the population rather from want of sympathy than from the absence of the desire to do right. It was an admirable speech, this first "account of his stewardship," in excellent taste ; but strong in its insistence that Parliament must take a much more serious view than it had up to that time taken of the demands for legislation that were being made by the working class.

XV

MR. BURT AND MR. BRADLAUGH



CHAPTER XV

MR. BURT AND MR. BRADLAUGH

MR. BURT was for many years a close friend of the late Charles Bradlaugh, and how that came about shall be presently related. It was not identity of views which brought them together, but simple kindness of nature. Mr. Burt's mind had, indeed, drifted away from its Primitive Methodist environment ; but only to the extent of a rather detached interest in Unitarianism. The change was at first somewhat distressing to his father, who, as one story has it, went to the length of remonstrance. "Well, father," was the son's rejoinder, "there's nobody to blame for it but you. Do you know what you gave me on my twenty-first birthday? It was Barker's 'Life of Channing.'" There was then at Newcastle a Unitarian minister, still living, the Rev. J. C. Street, whose preaching attracted several men of some eminence in the North. The late Joseph Cowen was often to be seen among his congregation, and to the Church of the Divine Unity, in New Bridge Street, Newcastle, Mr. Burt frequently found his way on Sundays. Mr. Street was a man of fine literary culture, a politician as well as a preacher, serious but cheerful, one of those broad, deep, influences which radiate far beyond their own immediate circle. He continued to be spoken of with affection and admiration in Newcastle for many years after he had left that place for Belfast.

When he first became a candidate for a seat in Parliament Mr. Burt's religious views were, not unnaturally perhaps, a subject of much mental perturbation to some of the electors.

At a meeting at Blyth the candidate was asked whether or not he believed in the authenticity of the Bible. An unhesitating "yes" or "no" was peremptorily demanded. The reply of Mr. Burt is probably the finest that has ever been made under similar circumstances. "As," he said, "I am not a candidate for a professorship of theology or the occupancy of a pulpit, I decline to say whether I do or do not believe in the authenticity of the Bible. The question is entirely foreign to the business before us. The contest in which we are engaged is a political and not a religious contest. I maintain that the constituency has no right whatever to institute an inquisition into the faith or creed of any candidate who may solicit its suffrages. For this reason I refuse to answer all and every question of a theological nature that may here or elsewhere be put to me." And to this principle he has firmly adhered.

Such insignificant theological tumult as there was on this occasion—it included an attempt to brand Mr. Burt as an Atheist—may have arisen less out of associations with Unitarianism than out of an incident which had occurred in the constituency a few years earlier. Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, almost an idol of the Northumbrian miners in his later years, had been announced to lecture at Blyth. He was at that stage of his career when it often became necessary to break open the doors of the halls he had hired before any meeting could be held. But at Blyth there was no hall to be had on any terms. Nobody would let either hall or school-room to so notorious a person as "Iconoclast." Then Mr. Richard Fynes came to the rescue. He has already been mentioned as working with Mr. Burt in the Cramlington coal-pit, and as the historian of miners' movements in the Northern counties. A man of immense energy, he was now about to plunge into theatrical management, and he had just purchased a building at Blyth with the intention of turning it into a theatre. This place he offered to Mr. Bradlaugh, who was thus able to deliver his lecture, which proved to be the fore-runner of many others in the same town. Mr. Burt attended the meeting out of curiosity more than from any other motive,

and was so attracted by the lecturer that he asked him and a few friends home to supper. The incident is related in Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonnor's life of her father. The Burt people, she says, were horror-stricken, but courteous. "It is very curious," says Mrs. Bonnor, "that Mr. Burt had no idea how very appropriate his hospitality was. It was not until after he had given his invitation that he learned that in all Blyth there was no place of refreshment that would open its doors to the Atheist."

The acquaintanceship begun in this way was destined to become very close, and to extend up to Mr. Bradlaugh's death. The great Freethinker speedily won his way to the hearts of the miners, and they elected him year after year as one of the speakers at their annual demonstrations. He was present, as he himself records, when the first political resolution was adopted at one of these meetings. This was in 1872. It was then, I think, that the miners burnt a copy of the hated "bond." Political resolutions have ever since that time been the chief dish on the bill of fare at these annual demonstrations of the Northumberland miners. It was then usual to hold the meeting on Blyth Links, where there was a strip of yellow sand between the multitude of listeners and the fringe of the German Ocean. There Mr. Bradlaugh had the opportunity of matching his wonderful voice, capable of the most telling modulations, against the diapason of the sea. Of these days Mr. W. E. Adams relates an illuminating anecdote. He says that a party of friends from Newcastle were on their way to spend a brief holiday in Ireland. Among them was Thomas Burt, then newly elected member of Parliament for Morpeth. They were seated in a train at Carlisle ready to start for Dumfries *en route* to Stranraer. Suddenly there was a commotion on the platform. A working man had been deprived of his seat, and was swearing and gesticulating at large. The Newcastle travellers invited him to take a vacant seat among them. The man was still in a rage. "Joe Cowen shall hear of this," he muttered. The travellers pricked up their ears. "Joe Cowen?" said one of them; "who is he?" "Wat! nivvor hard of Joe Cowen?"

He's wor member, and winnot see a warking man wranged." "Oh, then, you come from Newcastle?" "No, aa divvent; aa belang Dor'm, and wark at Medomsley." "You will know Mr. Crawford, then?" (William Crawford was then the agent of the Durham miners.) "Aa shud think se—hard him at aall wor demonstrations." "Do you know Mr. Burt too?" "Wat! Tommy Bort? Aa ken him as weel as aa ken ma ain brither." Further leading questions and much silent chuckling followed. "Hard him at wor last demonstration. Tommy's varry good—varry good for a skuyl-room. But Charlie Bradlaugh's the man for the oppen air." Then followed great praise of Bradlaugh's oratory, and the train stopped at a wayside station, when the man from Medomsley, bidding his acquaintances goodbye, staggered across the platform to the exit. "Good for a schoolroom," while it added to the mirth of the party, says Mr. Adams, was accepted as a testimony that the intellectual predominated over the physical powers of the member for Morpeth.

In 1880 Mr. Bradlaugh was returned to the House of Commons as one of the members for Northampton, and then began that strange and deplorable series of "scenes in the House" which was continued up to the election of a new Parliament. It was not merely a long-established friendship which led Mr. Burt to range himself staunchly by the side of the man who had won a seat which he was not permitted to occupy, and who, ultimately, so far won the good opinion of those who had been his most bitter antagonists that, just as he was dying, worn out by a too strenuous life, the House, with the approval of a Conservative Government, tampered with its own records in order that the history of its former treatment of him might be expunged. Mr. Burt would have been at his elbow all the same if he had possessed no personal knowledge of his character. Like John Bright, he contended for the principle that a constituency must judge for itself as to whom it may send to Parliament as its representative. This position he maintained by effective speech—effective in itself, though of no avail at the moment; but beyonp

this he was, like Mr. Labouchere, Mr. Bradlaugh's colleague in the representation of Northampton, always at hand with advice, encouragement, and that kindly cheer which became necessary to one every fibre of whose being was strained by his passionate and long-continued conflict. When he was returned to the House for a second time, after having sat and voted in it under conditions in which, according to a decision of the courts, he was liable to penalties to the extent of £100,000, it was Mr. Burt and Mr. Labouchere who led Mr. Bradlaugh up to the table to take the oath, on which occasion the Speaker said: "The hon. member for Northampton having been introduced, has come to the table to take the oath required by law in the accustomed form. He is prepared to comply with every provision of the Statutes in order to take his seat in this House. Undoubtedly, a proceeding so regular and formal ought, under ordinary circumstances, to be continued without interruption; but having regard to former resolutions of the House, and to the reports of the Committees in reference to this matter, I cannot withhold from the House an opportunity of expressing its judgment upon the new conditions under which the oath is now proposed to be taken." The judgment of the House was that Mr. Bradlaugh should not be permitted to take the oath, though he was permitted to address the members. In the end, he was removed by the Sergeant-at-Arms.

At a later stage of this singular conflict Mr. Bradlaugh announced that he proposed to go down to Westminster and take his seat as a member among members. He did go down, on the day he had named. "Business began as usual, at four o'clock," writes one who was present, "and at a quarter past five Mr. Bradlaugh came down from his position under the Gallery, and stood just behind the line which divides the 'bar,' bolt upright, shoulders squared, left foot slightly to the front, and arms dangling straight down, loosely, by his sides. Five sessions of intense excitement did not seem to have aged him by an hour. Presently Mr. Burt went and stood on his left hand, and, shortly

after, Mr. Labouchere took up a position on his right, in front of a small knot of members congregated in the doorway, Mr. Bradlaugh standing a full head and shoulders taller than either of his introducers. At exactly six minutes to six, seizing the instant when the questions had come to an end, he ran up to the mace—bending from the middle, his large black coat-skirts flapping outwards—Mr. Burt and Mr. Labouchere doing their best to keep up with his hurried strides. Then his companions retired, leaving him alone, ‘the observed of all observers.’” There was no assistance from the officials of the House. The member for Northampton swore himself on a New Testament of his own, signed his name on a sheet of paper which he took from his pocket, and then retired to his seat under the Gallery, amid the shouts and groans of a most disorderly House. But he had advanced nothing. The House decided that no oath had been taken, and though Mr. Bradlaugh voted in the division his name was expunged from the list. Mr. Burt had long previously given the House an undertaking that, on certain terms, Mr. Bradlaugh would not disturb its proceedings until the lawsuit against him had been decided. He was now among the foremost of those who begged that the member for Northampton might at least have the use of the library and dining-room, undertaking that he should not disturb the debates; but the House was in no temper to yield anything at that moment. Mr. Bright assured it that Mr. Bradlaugh’s “word might be taken”; but it laughed at him. Another appeal to the electors of Northampton followed with the same result as before; and so the painful struggle was continued until a General Election returned the Conservatives to power, after which the question was not again raised.

The two men who had stood together through five years of unexampled conflict with the House of Commons were close co-workers when the struggle was over. Mr. Burt’s name was on the back of Mr. Bradlaugh’s Land Cultivation Bill. They both came under the lash of the Socialists for the same reasons. Mr. Hyndman described them as friends

of the plundering classes. This was on the question of Employers' Liability. Mr. Bradlaugh published a pamphlet in defence of the position they had taken up, in the form of a letter addressed to Mr. Burt. He had always, he said, opposed those workers who sought to make it illegal for masters to insure themselves against loss through accident to their men ; and on that point Mr. Burt fully agreed with him. Such insurance, it need scarcely be said, is now almost universal, and there is a strong party in the House of Commons which desires to make it compulsory.

It remains to be said that on Mr. Bradlaugh's death Mr. Burt contributed a touching article on him to the *Primitive Methodist Quarterly Review*, which would have seemed a strange place for such a memoir to appear in only ten or a dozen years earlier.

XVI

“THE WORKMEN’S CHARTER”—DEPRESSION
AND STRIKES—NON-UNIONISTS



CHAPTER XVI

"THE WORKMEN'S CHARTER"—DEPRESSION AND STRIKES— NON-UNIONISTS

THE year following that in which Mr. Burt entered the House of Commons was the most important of all years, before or since, in respect to legislation bearing upon the organisation of labour and the legal status of trade unions. It was the year of what has been called "the Workmen's Charter." Mr. Cross, now for many years a member of the House of Lords, had succeeded Mr. Bruce at the Home Office, and he was immediately subjected to pressure by the Labour men both inside and outside the House. Mr. George Howell was lobbying every day for the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, and Mr. Burt and Mr. MacDonald were as assiduously urging the rights of labour to more just legislation within doors. Some conspicuous injustices had recently been done under the Master and Servant Act. The gas stokers' case, mentioned in Mr. Burt's address, was of recent memory. The courts had, in fact, been engaged in reducing the Labour laws to a state not only of ineffectiveness, but of chaos. There was, in consequence, an urgent demand for immediate legislation, and the new Government, with Mr. Disraeli at its head, had not long been in office before a Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the operation of the Master and Servant Act and the law of Conspiracy. This was not what the trade unionists wanted. They maintained that the facts were too well known to make further inquiry necessary, and they looked on the Royal Commission as a

device for shelving the whole subject, which was probably the Government intention.

On the day before the Commission was finally constituted, which was on March 19, 1874, Mr. "Tom" Hughes, Mr. Burt, and Mr. Alexander MacDonald were requested to accept seats on that body. They were pressed for an immediate decision. In two hours, they were assured, the list of names must be sent for her Majesty's approval. Mr. Burt was in no disposition to be hustled, and he stood aside; but Mr. Hughes and Mr. MacDonald assented. "Mr. Burt," writes Mr. George Howell, "appears to have preferred that Mr. MacDonald should serve rather than himself." There was really no reason why they should not have served together, for they had both been requested to do so. But the member for Morpeth was among those who were not convinced that the Commission could serve any useful purpose. Few Labour men were willing to give evidence before it; Mr. George Howell was excluded from the lobby—a step speedily repented of and reversed—because he declined to give evidence for his own part; and Mr. Alexander MacDonald issued a separate report. In short, the Royal Commission served only to pass the time, from one point of view. From another, it had the most important results, for the rejection of its report by the trade unionists paved the way for a great historic surrender.

In the Queen's Speech of 1875 there was a promise of a Bill, or Bills, for dealing with the Labour laws; but the session was getting ominously near to its close before any such measures made their appearance. "The Government was considering the matter," it was said. It was so long in doing so that the trade unionists determined to give Mr. Cross a severe shaking, and as a result the Government thrust a second and final report of the Royal Commission aside, and hurriedly produced measures which were far in advance of its recommendations. Curiously enough, there was a chorus of approval. "One of the many odd things connected with the Labour legislation of 1875," writes Mr. Howell, "was the sudden conversion of the newspaper Press. Instead of

denunciation there was general commendation. Those papers which supported the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1871, and which for the ensuing three years denounced trade union leaders, trade unions, and all their doings, supported Mr. Cross as though his policy had been that of the journals aforesaid all the time. The *Times* described the attitude of employers as remarkable in acquiescing in the change. Indeed," it said, still with some astonishment remaining, "it was a remarkable turnover."

The Government, it should be said, not only produced Bills much in advance of anything that could have been expected from it, but was not obstinate in regard to amendments, many of which were moved, seconded, or supported by Mr. Burt, whose name is continually appearing in the reports of the proceedings, and whose tact accomplished what merely obstinate persistence could never have done. The trade unionists, in fact, made the law what they wanted it to be, within a few fractions, at least. "We never regarded the Labour laws of 1875 as perfect," says Mr. Howell. "Our desire was to abolish class legislation, and to bring all, without distinction, within the general law of the land. . . . All the amendments proposed to the clauses of the Bill had this object, those accepted and defeated alike. We obtained much—as much as was possible under the circumstances." Mr. Henry Crompton, a great authority on Labour legislation, requested to report on what had actually been accomplished, said that the new law took legislative power out of the hands of the judges, and of one clause he remarked, "The Trade Union Act legalises workmen's combinations: this clause legalises all acts done in furtherance of the combination that are not crimes when done by one man. The common law of conspiracy as affecting trade disputes has, in fact, been abolished." Mr. Frederic Harrison "concurred in this statement generally." He was rather cautious, perhaps, because to some extent he foresaw what was to take place years later, when the Tory party had come round to Lord Salisbury's view that trade unions were "cruel combinations," when the judges again began to construe the law

after a fashion of their own, and when the Taff Vale Case made it necessary to do the work of 1875 over again. However, the earlier legislation made the success of the later Trades' Disputes Bill inevitable. Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb, give the credit of this great success to what was then called "the Junta," a body of unusually able trade unionists. "It is they," it is observed, "aided by Alexander MacDonald and Thomas Burt, who had actually carried through the final achievement of 1875."

It was on the ground of what had been extorted from the Disraeli Government, through Mr. Cross, that Mr. Chamberlain founded his extraordinary statement that "almost all the legislation dealing with Labour questions has been initiated by Tory statesmen, and most of it has been passed by Tory Governments." To this, in an article in the *Nineteenth Century*, Mr. Burt curtly rejoined: "This is not a self-evident proposition; no proof is vouchsafed. It is enough, therefore, to deny its correctness."

Whilst these things were being done in the House of Commons there was a great deal of labour unrest in the country. In Northumberland it culminated in May, 1877. The "pitmen's happy times" had come to an end. There was general and deep trade depression. Employers were demanding such large reductions of wages that the conciliatory method of arranging differences through a Joint Committee, one of the greatest of Mr. Burt's achievements, temporarily broke down. The Northumberland miners, getting beyond the control of their leaders for the time being, struck against proposals which would, taken all round, have involved a reduction of wages of 25 per cent. Almost every colliery in the county came out, and over 21,000 workmen were involved. There was for a while some eclipse of Mr. Burt's popularity, and his life was during that time exceedingly anxious, laborious, and trying. But, as scarcely needs to be said, the mode of arrangement had to be left in the hands of the leaders after all. It was the method advocated by Mr. Burt on all such occasions. After the strike had lasted eight weeks, at a cost of £56,000 to the Union,

it was settled by that process of arrangement which the member for Morpeth had recommended from the beginning, the decision being particularly favourable to the men. Unfortunately, peace had not been re-established. It was a long truce that had been called; but this was not broken for ten years, when there was a demand for a 15 per cent. réduction in some cases and a 10 per cent. reduction in others. Then it was that Mr. Burt, fully appreciating the condition of trade, and desiring to be as light a burden as possible on the miners, set an example by reducing his own salary from £500 to £400 a year, above which it has never since been permitted to rise. But here, again, it was impossible to avert a strike, or to disabuse the minds of some of the men of the idea that by urging reasonable counsels their leader was betraying their interests. There was a strike lasting over seventeen weeks, involving 14,000 persons this time, and costing the Union over £40,000. The end of it all was a reduction of $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. all round.

Throughout more recent years there has been almost complete tranquillity, except in respect of differences between unionists and non-unionists, which nearly occasioned a strike at some of the larger Northumberland collieries within a few weeks of the time at which this chapter is being written. There are not many non-unionists in the coal-pits of Northumberland and Durham. In these two counties, indeed, the proportion of trade union members to the men who have not joined any trade union is conspicuously higher than in any other county in England. All non-unionists, of course, profit by trade union action. They get the benefit of what other men have paid for, and there is consequently a decided indisposition to work by their side, or to "ride" with them, as it is called, in allusion to the method of ascending and descending the pit shaft. The late William Crawford held disastrously wrong views on this subject. He would not hear of any such doctrine as that a man has the same right to refuse to join a union as to join it. Mr. and Mrs. Webb publish a letter from him which is quite Biblical in its advocacy of a

policy of exclusion. "In numberless cases," he said, "you refuse to descend or ascend with non-unionists. The right or wrong of such action I will not discuss ; but what is the actual state of things found in many parts of the county ? While you refuse to descend and ascend with these men, you walk to and from the pit, walk in and out by with them—nay, sometimes work with them. You mingle with them at home over your glass of beer, in your chapels, and side by side you pray with them in your prayer-meetings. The time has come when there must be plain speaking on this matter. It is no use playing at shuttlecock in this important portion of our social life. Either mingle with these men in the shaft, as you do in every other place, or let them be ostracised at all times and in every place. Regard them as unfit companions for yourselves and your sons, and unfit husbands for your daughters. Let them be branded, as it were, with the curse of Cain, as unfit to mingle in ordinary, honest, and respectable society."

This was written in a temper as impossible to Mr. Burt as its views are remote from his ways of thinking. That every man ought to be in the Union he believes as strongly as did Mr. Crawford ; but he believes first of all in liberty. He hates coercion in the coal-pits as much as coercion in Ireland ; and whilst he encourages the use of all legitimate means to draw non-unionists within the Union, he will countenance no compulsion to that end. The result is not that non-unionists increase in numbers in the Northumberland coal-pits, but that they become fewer.

XVII

A FAMOUS TRADES UNION CONGRESS



CHAPTER XVII

A FAMOUS TRADES UNION CONGRESS

THE Trades Union Congress, never a very staid body, and always liable to violent and sudden eruptions, was at its wildest in the session of 1891, when it was held in the Town Hall at Newcastle-on-Tyne, with Mr. Burt in the chair. Much wider and more close attention was given to this Congress than had been attracted by any of its predecessors. What was then called "the new unionism" had suddenly come into being. It had at length been found possible to organise large masses of unskilled labour, and the new unions were now represented at Newcastle, chiefly by men who had not taken part in a Trades Union Congress before, and who were full of fight, being at that stage of inexperience which encouraged them to believe that their ideas were those of a new time, and that the best thing to do with the old trade unionism was to clear it out of the way. Many of them have since become wise and cautious leaders, and are sitting in Parliament, with other leaders of trade unionism who were then unknown. "The difference between the old unionism and the new," said Mr. Burt, "is chiefly that the new unionism is wanting in experience."

Socialism, too, was then beginning to make itself felt as an influence in trade union circles. It had sprung from the middle classes, in which it had so far found its leaders; but it was now filtering down to the working class, its adherents at this time not being very numerous, but making up in eagerness and aggressiveness for all that they wanted in numbers. In one of the side galleries of the Newcastle

Town Hall, day after day during the continuance of the Congress, sat Mr. Keir Hardie, so keenly set on making a new departure that he seemed to some of those who were present to be somewhat arrogant and fierce. At no previous Congress had he been nearly so prominent a figure as in this, and it was at Newcastle that he presented himself as the possible leader of a new party.

In this remarkable assembly, full of deadly earnestness, not disinclined to turbulence, nearly always at the boiling-point, Mr. Burt, a man of much culture, gentle manners, retiring habits, and views to which many of the new delegates were opposed, as being in their opinion old-fashioned and worn out, might have seemed to be in rather a false position as President. Probably the new unionists thought that they would have an easy task with him when it suited their purpose to dispute his rulings. But there was a calm, masterful side to his character which was yet to reveal itself to the public, as it did at this opportunity. A greater personal triumph than Mr. Burt gained at the Newcastle Congress no reasonable man could desire, though personal triumph was certainly not one of the objects on which he had set his mind. His great and convincing gift of speech stood him in good stead, of course ; but a temper that nothing could ruffle, a firmness that no clamour could overcome or in the least weaken, alertness, humour, quick perception of the bearing of every point raised, absolute tolerance, and immovable insistence on the authority of the chair, were the qualities which made him indisputably the best President of a Trades Union Congress ever heard of before or since.

Here I shall again quote the brief but most excellent pamphlet of Mr. George Jacob Holyoake on the subject of this biography. Speaking of Mr. Burt's Presidential Address, Mr. Holyoake says, "The whole oration was a masterpiece of argument without invective. The speaker showed that he knew the limitations of every question he raised, and the boldest propositions were stated with a sagacity worthy of Cobden. Nor was this all. During the six days of discussion he stilled the wildest tempests, regulated the most confused

debate, made every point of order lucid, arrested the impetuous, reconciled the offended, and decided points with promptness and fairness. Wit, humour, common sense, and apt illustration delighted the delegates, won their confidence and admiration, maintained order and advanced business in a way no Speaker of the House of Commons could excel. Such courtesy and decision, such union of deference and authority, had never been seen in a trades union chair before—and not often elsewhere. No one imagined that so much gentleness of manner, natural to Mr. Burt, co-existed with so much judicial strength. Not only the Congress but the country recognised in him a man of industrial affairs."

The Address was a model of its kind, remarkable no less for its statement of great principles as they apply to the relationship between employers and employed, than for the sobriety and the weight of its eloquence. After an introduction in which he spoke of the position Tyneside had occupied in the Labour movement—"The nine hours' movement, under the leadership of John Burnett," who was on the platform by the way, "was fought and won on Tyneside"—Mr. Burt said:—

I see before me perhaps—indeed I think I may omit "perhaps"—and say the largest and most representative body of trade unionists that ever has met within the boundaries of this Empire. I think I might go further, and say, that has ever met anywhere in the civilised world. We have the unskilled labourers represented as they never were before. I hardly like to say unskilled. I would rather say less skilled, because all labour, even the rudest, requires a considerable amount of skill. All honour to the men who have organised these masses. I for one rejoice at their success. Because as the very first step of progress, you must have organisation. I am glad, too, that we have the women of this country more largely represented than they have been before. Women need organisation even more than men. And wherever woman does the same work, in quality and in quantity as men, she ought to ask for the same pay as the men. And we ought to support her, not only on the grounds of justice and humanity, but on grounds of self-defence in asserting that claim. Labour ought to be recognised as a whole. We don't want any classes or castes. We want no barriers of race or colour. Wherever the oppressor crushes, wherever an effort is made to lift the fallen, our sympathies and our help ought to go forth to aid the oppressed. It is one of your Standing Orders that papers in support of trade unions are unnecessary. Speeches in support of trade unions are also unnecessary. I should as soon think—standing near the birthplace of George Stephenson—of attempting to

vindicate the locomotive engine or the railway system. They have vindicated themselves. The locomotive, however, needs to be controlled, and to be kept on the rails, if it is to do effective rather than destructive work. And it is the same with trade unions. We have won great victories in the past. We need not expatiate on those victories. A great change has taken place within my own memory. Twenty-seven years ago, when I delivered my first trade union speech, I remember we had few friends. I remember that we were told by the political economists that wages were settled by demand and supply entirely. Well, we have converted the political economists. Demand and supply is a factor, and at your peril you forget that ! But we have taught them that men are something more than machines—that they are not bales of cotton, or tons of coal, or hogsheads of sugar, but that they have affections, that they have a soul, that they have a will, that they are men, and that they must be treated as men. They have had to add humanity to their political economy. I do not want to mention names, but take a man like Professor Marshall, with his firm grasp of political economy, combined with the recognition of manhood and the rights of the worker, and you see that we have made some headway.

We were told then, too, that trade unionism always meant strikes. Some of the stupidest, some of the most foolish strikes I have ever known have been by non-unionists and of only partially organised men, and you may take this as a fact, that if the union once gets its feet fairly set, in proportion to its power, there will be a diminution rather than an increase of strikes. The newer unions have, perhaps, by their previous apathy, or by the difficulties they have had to face, found themselves hemmed in all round. They hardly have their right of existence recognised. Their leaders are victimised ; they have no weapon but strikes. But, as they become organised, you will find that strikes will diminish rather than increase. Do not let me be misunderstood. Many of you know that I have faced unpopularity in order to avoid strikes ; but I am not here to utter a wholesale condemnation of strikes. On the contrary, I am here to say that, in many cases, owing to the clatter and brawl of the machinery, owing to the deafness of Mammon and its blindness—I am here to say that, in many cases, the workman cannot get attention until he stops the wheels. But the strike is an ugly weapon. I don't know whether any of you have tried to throw a boomerang. It is a very deadly weapon : but if it is not skilfully thrown, it is apt to come back, and to hit and to wound the thrower. So it is, gentlemen, with a strike. We cannot give up the right to strike, however. We are glad that through the watchfulness of the London Trades Council, we have had our right to strike vindicated before the law, showing that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. But wherever we can have our difficulties and our disputes calmly argued and settled by the arbitrament of reason, I venture to say that we are fools—almost criminals—if we resort to a strike. One of the things, however, that trade unions have not wholly established is the right to ask and to demand of the capitalist, however powerful and proud he may be, that he shall receive and listen to your properly accredited representatives. Now the probability is that strikes in the future, when they do occur, will be on a larger scale than they have been in the past. Workmen will refuse to blackleg ; they will refuse to do it either directly or

indirectly. They will refuse to supplant, so far as they possibly can, their fellows who, they believe, are striking and struggling for their right. And, gentlemen, I have not a word to say against that, and some of you may think it would be a wholesome lesson to the stupidest among the capitalists to teach them the value of labour by bringing, as far as possible, the whole of the industries of the country to a standstill.

I am glad that that has met with only faint applause. It is very attractive, and, ladies and gentlemen, I venture to say that, if we were dealing only with the stupidest and the most tyrannical, I, for one, would not discourage that idea. But bear in mind that it is a very difficult game to play, and that it would hurt the innocent much more than the guilty—that the wealthy capitalist would hardly enjoy a single luxury the less. If you could carry on your strike long enough, and make it extensive enough to make him feel not only in his purse, perhaps the most vulnerable point, or next to his stomach the most vulnerable, and you could make him feel in his stomach also; but long before you reach that thousands and tens of thousands of women and children and the bread-winners would have suffered, and, perhaps, many of them have been carried to a premature grave.

Let me refer for a moment to the representative power of this Congress. I believe you represent something like two millions of workers. Even allowing for some little exaggeration, that is an enormous number. And your strength is not to be measured by a million and a half or two millions. The organised, when they win a victory, win it for the disorganised as well as for themselves. If you are, as I doubt not you are, thoroughly in earnest, if you are unanimous and determined, it is difficult, it is almost impossible to set a limit to what you could accomplish. But we are not unanimous. We cannot but accept facts as they are. If you have brain, and use your brain, if you think for yourselves, as you do, that itself means difference of opinion. Some of our opponents look with a certain amount of complacency, not to say glee, upon our divisions. Don't let them mistake. We have our differences of opinion. But if they presume on that and attack us, they will find that blood is thicker than water. I am not going to minimise these differences. They are exaggerated by our opponents. We have nothing to gain by attempting to smother them. The best thing is to ventilate them thoroughly. But, after all, they are differences not so much in objects and in principles as in details and in means. They are not, perhaps, less important on that account. I am not going to dwell upon them. They ought to be thoroughly discussed, but it is not for your chairman to discuss them.

Probably, the great dividing line among us is as to the proper functions of the State. Some of you would ask little; you would ask simply that life and limb should be protected, that machinery should be properly inspected, and that existing laws should be enforced. Others would almost demand a fundamental change in our whole industrial system, and make the State the sole or almost the sole, producer and employer of labour. Well, I am not going to discuss the point. Perhaps you will allow me to say that my own leaning is in the direction of self-help, and of associated effort, rather than in that of State compulsion. It is hardly likely, however, that I, as a politician—a very humble one—would undervalue the machinery of State. We know

that it has accomplished much for us ; we believe that it will do much more in the future. You are acting honourably and constitutionally in using every legitimate weapon within your reach for the improvement of the conditions of labour. Apart from special Labour legislation, there are many things, I would venture to say, hardly less important to the workman, that the State may do, and on which we, as regards general principles, entirely agree. Waste could be diminished ; the burdens of taxation could be more equitably adjusted. Intemperance, that great cancer that eats into the souls and bodies of men, might have a healthy public opinion directed through the agency of the State to check it at its source. The substitution of the arbitrament of reason and common sense for war all the world over, would immensely lighten the burdens of humanity. Special privileges, monopolies, sinecures—we have been touching them—but they have to be swept away.

Those who derive large incomes from land and mineral resources ought to bear some proportion of the burdens of taxation, commensurate with the large revenues that they have received. The land question touches you at every point. It is a question of food, of health, of recreation, of life. We want to strike the fetters off the land. We want to do something to turn the tide of migration now running so strongly from the country into the towns, into healthier channels, and whatever the tenure of land system that may prevail, we want to insist upon it that the utmost in the shape of health, recreation, and life should be got out of the land for the sustenance and well-being of our constantly increasing population.

These are some of the questions, and beyond these there are others. Do not suppose that our programme is exhausted. Working men must see that outside their own special questions there are broader questions still. The great book of a hundred years ago was Adam Smith's "Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations." What we have to inquire into now is the cause and the cure of the poverty of the individual. We have learned to some extent the art of production—not too well. There is not such a thing as over-production, if you look at the needs of men. The problem we have to solve in the future is the better distribution of wealth. We want to see that the worker shall have a larger and more equitable share in the wealth that he produces. We want that the poor man's child shall have a fair chance in the race of life. You cannot have absolute social equality, but we want to give him at any rate the tools. We want to have every child well fed, well clothed, equipped with the ripest scholarship that can be afforded, in order that he may, as I have said, have the tools, and may be able to carve for himself his way to an honourable career, and become a credit to himself and a blessing to humankind. These are some of the things we want : these are some of the things we are striving after. We want that individuals shall not here and there be raised to colossal proportions, but that every man—the humblest—who is willing to toil, shall have fair-play. I sympathise somewhat with Browning's prayer :—

"Make no more giants, God,
But elevate the race at once !"

Still there is a touch of impatience in that prayer. These short cuts to the

millennium do not seem to be smiled upon by Providence. It does not seem to be God's way of elevating men. We have to deal with things as they are. To my mind the giant and the dwarf are both abnormal. The millionaire and the pauper are both monstrosities, and, if ever we become a Christian and a civilised nation, they will both disappear. But, ladies and gentlemen, so long as we have the giants—no doubt you and I would rather everybody was six feet high—that would be levelling up, but, in the meantime, my method is to utilise the giant. The main question to me is—Is he a good giant? Will he strike and crush, slay and destroy, or will he lift, will he elevate, will he lighten the burdens of the dwarfs? Therefore, you see, it becomes a moral and an educational problem that we have to solve.

I believe no man was ever nearer right than Joseph Mazzini, one of the grandest men of the century, when he told the workmen to put duty in the place of right. "The sole origin of every right," he says, "is in a duty fulfilled." Well, now, that is the key of the problem. If you take your stand upon right, then let me remind you that cruel, inhuman things may be done while you are keeping strictly within the bounds of your rights. But if you appeal to duty, then you have a leverage that brings in the wealthy man as well as the poor, that throws a greater obligation upon the wealthy man than upon the poor man. But we all have our obligations. Power carries with it responsibility. Right carries with it duty. Don't imagine that it is only the wealthy that have their duties. You, the representatives, the accredited spokesmen, of two millions of men, you have not wealth, but you have what money cannot buy—you have the confidence of tens of thousands of men. They will listen to you. I will not say you can mould them. You cannot. But they will listen to you. If you perform your duty in your sphere, they will perform theirs in their sphere. And your representative power, let me tell you, carries with it an enormous responsibility. Well, we recognise that responsibility. I speak for myself; may I speak for you? May I say we recognise that responsibility? And we are determined—while we endeavour to do the right—to direct our power and our energies to the improvement of men, to strive to raise not only an individual here and there, but humanity as a whole to a greater position of material well-being, and to loftier heights of intelligence and of nobility of character than it has heretofore attained.

"There were loud cheers," says the report, "during which the President resumed his seat, after speaking a little over half an hour." It would have been difficult to find any place worse adapted to the holding of a Labour Conference than the Town Hall of Newcastle-on-Tyne, except in regard to its capacity. It is a long, wedge-shaped room, the head of the wedge being the end at which the platform stands. Those who occupy the further extremity of the space are little more than spectators, being, as a rule, able neither to make themselves heard nor to hear what is being addressed

to them. Notable concerts have been held in the hall, and with great success ; but vocalists who had appeared there more than once soon made the discovery that instead of singing straight at their audience it was advisable to pitch their voices against the wall on the right-hand side of the stage. The secret was not known to the speakers at the Trades Union Congress, and, so far as appeared to many of the delegates, most of the speeches were delivered in dumb show. Mr. Burt's own voice is somewhat thin, but it carries far ; and as the delegates were quiet during the delivery of the Address, except in the intervals of cheering, the President was reasonably well heard throughout. But during the meetings which followed he had frequently to explain that, in consequence partly of the almost constant clamour, and partly in consequence of the defects of the building, he was quite unable to understand the nature of the proposals that were being made. He did not think they could reconstruct that hall in a week, he said, in response to complaints. "I have received," he remarked at another stage of the proceedings, "several remonstrances about the conduct of the chair, some sympathetic, some more severely worded. I find I am deserving of the strongest terms of censure. One gentleman says his patience is about exhausted. I don't know how much he had at the beginning. Mine has been tested—I won't say exhausted. When it is exhausted I get on the best way I can without my patience. That's just what that gentleman will have to do." Such playful interpolations as this calmed many a storm. Replying to a charge that he had shown favouritism, he said, "I think gentlemen will have observed that it makes little difference whether a man is near to me or far away. Friends of mine will know that it makes little difference, and I believe you are all my friends." Soft answers like this invariably turned away wrath.

There was an awkward moment when the Conference seemed determined to take extreme steps against Mr. Keir Hardie and his immediate supporter, Mr. King. They had endeavoured to secure the distribution among the delegates

of a document intended to influence votes, and this was against the Standing Orders. When the resulting "scene" was at its height, Mr. Burt said, "We are here just now to exercise judicial functions. I don't know whether you think we are in a very good room for deliberating and judging calmly, and I don't know whether you will think that I am censuring you unduly if I express a doubt as to whether you are quite in a judicial frame of mind. Now, the less there is said about this the better, in my opinion; and another opinion of mine is that the less there is done about it the better. It would be very nice to expel Mr. King and Mr. Hardie, and in your present temper you would do it; but it would not bear the reflection of to-morrow morning. The best thing you can do is to ignore it; and I hope it will be a warning to Mr. Keir Hardie and to Mr. King, and make them a little more careful in future. There may be other people who have not been found out who are quite as bad—they may be worse; and we will deal with them when we find them out. But now let us see if we can temper justice with mercy. Let the matter drop altogether. Not another word about it." And the matter dropped.

There were enthusiastic votes of thanks when the Congress concluded. In replying to the vote concerning himself, Mr. Burt expressed his obligations for the credit that had been given to him—through the Press and otherwise—an infinitely greater amount of credit, he said, than he deserved. The obligation rested with the members of the Congress as a body. It had confirmed his faith in the democracy. Carlyle had told them that the weak point of democracy was its want of reverence. Reverence was a good thing, and he hoped they all had it, providing that they took care to have reverence for right things. He had to admit that he had not held the balance equal. He could not do so; but he had taken care, where it was not held in fair balance, that his friends, and those who held the opinions he did, should have the worst of it. After the laughter which followed this manner of reversing Dr. Johnson's saying about letting "the Whig dogs have the worst of it," there followed an important

reference to the new element that had appeared in the Congress. He said, "Let me pay my respects to the party called Socialists. I do not know whether they admit that name." (Here there were Socialist cheers.) "I observe that they accept it. Well, perhaps some of them have discovered that I am myself much more a Socialist than they imagined. But I have had a little bit of experience in my time as to what is practicable and what is not, and what is best to deal with for the time being. Let us all make our ideal as high as we like, and keep it in front of us, and don't be satisfied until it is attained ; but in the meantime let us get what we can."

Such order as could be maintained at the Congress had frequently to be enforced by the use of a bell. It was an ordinary handbell at first, but this had to be at once abandoned as useless. It was almost inaudible. Then was procured such a bell as might have served the purposes of a town crier. The laughter with which its tollings were received in itself helped to bring the Congress to its senses when it seemed disposed to leave them. The smaller bell likewise had its uses. The speeches were limited as to duration, and Mr. Burt said that he felt the hardship of pulling a delegate up in the middle of his sentence, wherefore he had decided to use the smaller bell to signify when a speaker had exhausted all but a minute of his time, "and thus give him an opportunity of constructing his peroration."

Of the larger bell Mr. Burt said, as the Congress was approaching its end, "It was hinted yesterday that a friend of mine had been stating that on occasions when my temper was exhausted it was through domestic difficulties. You may accept my assurance that that is not the case ; but my wife has asked the Secretary of the Congress, as an especial favour, to let her have the bell at the conclusion of the proceedings, so that she can keep me in order ; and Mr. Harris has provisionally consented." At this there were boisterous shouts of "Agreed ! agreed !" and one of the last acts of the Congress was to present the bell to Mrs. Burt, having first placed upon it an inscription which was both a compliment and a record.

XVIII
SOUTH AFRICA



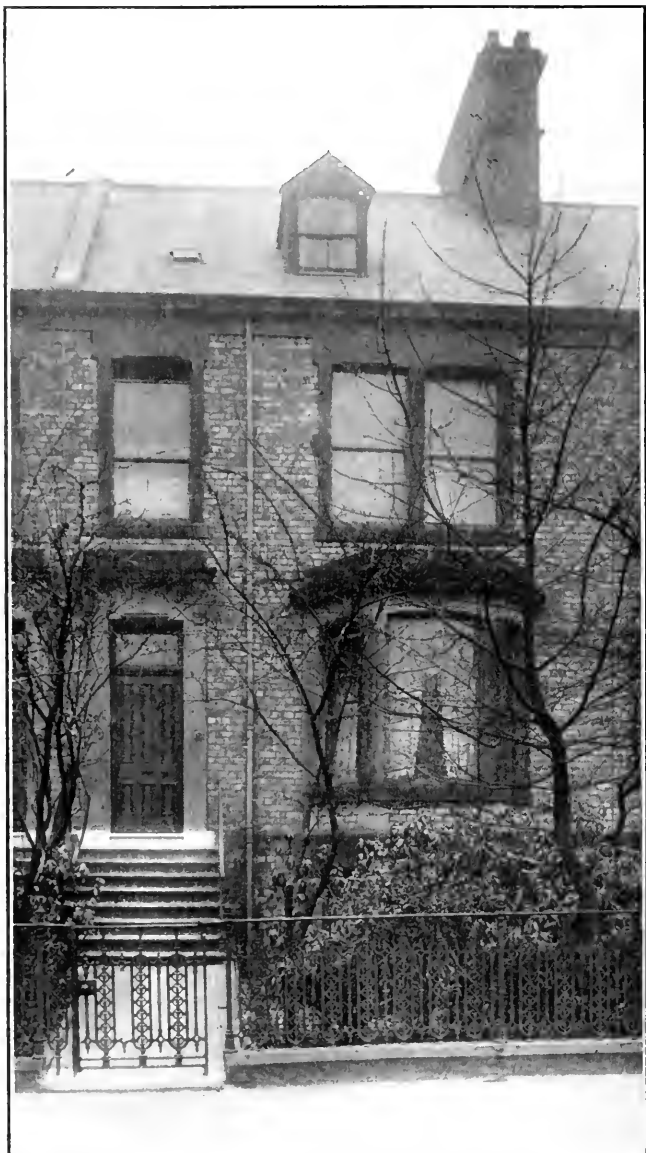


Photo by

Joseph Jobling, 34, Grey Street, Newcastle.

MR. BURT'S PRESENT RESIDENCE, NEWCASTLE.

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CHAPTER XVIII

SOUTH AFRICA

IN the Newcastle Town Hall Mr. Burt was present some years later at a meeting incomparably more stormy than even the worst moments of the Trades Union Congress. And again he was in the chair. One of those who saw no necessity for a conflict between ourselves and the Boers, who perceived that Mr. Chamberlain's new style of open diplomacy was tending to war, and who desired that his countrymen should understand the whole of the issues involved, he took an active part in the preservation of the peace that, as we can all now perceive, was most unprofitably broken. There were Northumbrian miners who had recently come back from the Transvaal—men who had been earning their £50 a month there, and who had come home because of the impending troubles, through which they had been thrown out of employment. It was arranged that these returned miners should be asked to address a meeting at the Burt Hall, erected by the miners in honour of Mr. Burt himself, and used not only as a place of meeting, but as the offices of the Northumberland Miners' Association. They might speak on one side or the other. It was not known what side they would take, nor had that been matter of consideration. They were expected only to give their actual impressions of what was taking place in the country they had just left. As it happened, they were all of one opinion. They had no grievance against the Boers ; they were strongly opposed to war. What they desired was that there should be a smooth settlement of all difficulties in the Transvaal, so

that they might go back to their work again. Not one of them had any soreness on the subject of the franchise, for the good reason that not one of them desired to abandon his English citizenship in order to acquire that of a country in which he had no intention of permanently residing. Mr. Burt was also in the chair at this meeting, which did much towards blunting the effect of the stories that were then coming to us from what Mr. Winston Churchill, even in his Conservative days, called "the land of lies." Mr. Burt was called a pro-Boer, of course. It was a convenient nickname at the time. No man deserved it less. His action was not based on admiration of the Boers, or any particular regard for them, but on the sincere desire that a great country like ours should do no wrong to a small one like the Transvaal.

Beyond giving this explanation, I do not intend to revive the controversies of that time, which divided friends no less than they infuriated political opponents. I merely propose to describe one of the most extraordinary meetings that was held anywhere in England during the whole of the exciting period preceding the war ; and the description will have this merit at least, that it is at first hand, as I was myself associated with Mr. Burt in all that took place.

A Committee, which included several of the leading Liberals of Newcastle, met at the offices of Dr. Robert Spence Watson, then President of the National Liberal Federation, to make arrangements for a meeting in the Town Hall, with the object of expressing such an opinion as might tend to avert war. It was to be a perfectly open meeting. The promoters were prepared to be voted down, but they felt bound in any case to make their own protest against a method of negotiation which actually did produce just those results which they anticipated and feared. The course of events from the moment that the meeting was determined upon must be counted amongst life's tragic ironies. On the day advertised for the protest there came news that war had been declared, and bills were immediately posted announcing that no meeting would take place. A meeting did take place, however, in the adjacent open space known

as the Bigg Market—a meeting full of sound and fury, addressed by advocates of war, in speeches mainly devoted to the denunciation of those who were anxious for the preservation of peace. It would not have been a safe meeting for Mr. Burt or any of his friends to have approached, even in the character of spectators.

As it turned out, the news which announced the commencement of hostilities had no foundation in fact. It had come from "the land of lies," and as there still seemed some ground for hope another meeting was announced for the same day of the following week, and that day, being the 9th of October, 1899, brought the now indisputable news of the issue of President Kruger's ultimatum. What was to be done? Mr. Burt was for doing nothing. In his opinion something had happened that was irremediable. To have followed his advice to abandon the second meeting would, no doubt, as one can see now, have been the wisest course to pursue. There was some foolhardiness, beyond question, in determining to go forward. Fierce opposition was certain; violent opposition was probable. Friends would misconceive the motive, and enemies would misrepresent the object, of anything that could possibly be done or said under the circumstances. But worse things would certainly be said if the meeting were not held. Without doubt the course advised by Mr. Burt—that of abandoning the affair—would have been followed but for what had been said and done at the out-of-doors gathering a week earlier. It seemed scarcely possible, however, with any kind of credit, to abandon two meetings in succession under what seemed like threats. Besides, the so-called "pro-Boers" had still something to say that they considered to be of importance. An urgency meeting of the organising committee was therefore held in the afternoon, and a new resolution was drawn up of such a character as any assembly of perfectly sane Englishmen could have adopted almost unanimously. But the temper of the time, unfortunately, was not that of perfect sanity.

It was with great reluctance, and only under earnest persuasion, that Mr. Burt consented to go to the Town Hall and

take the chair. He was a former Minister of the Crown ; he was persuaded that President Kruger had taken a false step ; he saw that there could be no possible result of the meeting further than to show that its promoters were men who were not to be intimidated by apprehensions of violence. But he was a good comrade on this as on all occasions, and he proceeded with his friends to the Town Hall, where it was found that the doors had been forced, possibly with the connivance of officials, and that the place was packed literally from floor to ceiling—for there is a gallery at the further end which rises nearly to the roof—by a singing, shouting, gesticulating, positively boiling mass of men who, as it soon appeared, had come to shout down the speakers. Not a single supporter of the promoters could be discerned in the whole assemblage, consisting of two thousand men, or more. Even the platform had been occupied, and when Mr. Burt and his friends made their appearance, amid a terrific storm of yells and hisses, a prominent member of the Conservative party was playing the conductor in front of the large organ, and leading a war-song with his walking-stick.

It was found possible to clear the platform without much trouble, or any great exchange of incivilities ; but nothing more was accomplished that night, though the meeting lasted from half-past seven to half-past eleven o'clock. Of the few words that Mr. Burt said from the chair, all of a conciliatory kind, not one was heard except by those who sat within a few feet of him. There is a College of Medicine in Newcastle, and, as was publicly stated, and as soon appeared to be the case, the students, who came down in a body, had been trained in a chorus which would have drowned the voice of Boanerges or the roar of the blinded Cyclops. An excited-looking little man stood on a chair in the middle of the hall, giving the signal and marking time. The regular, vociferous beating of voices in unison produced much the same effect as if a thousand feet were stamping on the floor. "*We—WANT—WAR! We—WANT—WAR! We—WANT—WAR!*" Thus, with absolute unanimity, in time carefully measured, the remarkable declaration being three times repeated, did the

medical students, and a large part of what it would be a grotesque misuse of words to call the audience, express their sentiments. Songs were interspersed throughout the proceedings, sung with immense vigour. "The Cock o' the North" was roared out repeatedly, and "Beer, glorious beer," and "Tommy Atkins," and other favourite ditties of the time. At the front of the distant gallery a stalwart, gesticulating, half-mad fellow had thrown his shirt open to display a hairy, very broad, and very red torso, which he used as a drum, beating on it with both hands, meantime shouting out words that nobody could understand, or even hear. He was, it seems, a member of the Army Reserve, recently called out, and, as I was told afterwards, was one of the early victims of the war.

It was Pandemonium rather than a meeting of civilised men. Mr. Charles Fenwick, M.P., who has a voice that seems capable of quelling riots, tried to make himself heard through an hour and a half. So did Dr. Clark, then a member of the Newcastle School Board (not to be confounded with another Dr. Clark whose name was much before the public at this period). Mr. Fenwick and the doctor might as well have spoken in the cave of the winds. What was said nobody knows. The noisy concourse which wanted war was not merely triumphant, but threatening. There was to be an attempt to storm the platform. This had become known early in the evening. The police paraded in front of the meeting—some of them, as could be seen, not too willingly. Yet nothing serious took place until about ten minutes past eleven o'clock, and then nothing so serious as had been looked for. The last train for the seaside left at 11.25, and the refreshment-room at the Central Station kept open to that time in order that passengers might have their final "drink."

As thus it was that, as Stevenson would say, a strange thing happened. Four or five friends residing at Tynemouth, feeling thirsty, and resolved to be well in time at the Central Station, began to make their way out of the Town Hall by striding over the seats towards the platform, hoping to find

exit that way, as the hall was too densely packed to permit them to retreat in any other direction. Their movement was taken as a signal. The whole audience rose in a body and surged forward. It was like the advance of a great wave. The reporters, sitting below, at the post of danger, rose at once to scale the platform, along the front of which the conductors of the meeting had now lined themselves. Some of the gentlemen of the Press were being dragged up by those who knew them, whilst others were being, not too gently, treated as a storming party. For a few seconds the situation looked very threatening, and then the wave stayed, just as suddenly as it had begun to roll over the seats, and the line of men on the platform—containing some of the tallest and most stalwart men in Newcastle, as it happened—and the promoters of disturbance, stood looking at each other, in the first silence there had been during the long evening. There was no physical violence, after all, and the noisy crowd streamed out into the streets, singing "The Cock of the North," and "*We—WANT—WAR!*"

In the House of Commons at a later date, and when speaking on the coal tax, Mr. Burt said, "If the Chancellor of the Exchequer could get contributions from all who clamoured for the war, beginning with the millionaires who took the initiative in South Africa—if he could get contributions from all those who, though opposed to the war, acquiesced in it without protest, that would be a broad enough basis for taxation. I am afraid that I should myself come under the latter head. I did, indeed, attempt in public meetings to speak upon this question before the war was declared, in favour of the dispute being referred to arbitration, but I was howled down. If I have any regret, it is that I was, perhaps, too easily cowed, and that I should not have protested more emphatically than I did against what I regard as the most disgraceful war in our history."

But he had never ceased to protest, from beginning to end. At the annual meeting of the National Liberal Federation at Bradford, in 1901, he said that an avoidable war was a crime against humanity, that he had never disguised his

opinion about the war in South Africa, and that he regarded it as the most disgraceful war we had ever undertaken. Then, in illustration of the change of feeling which had taken place on the subject, he said, "I ventured to repeat that opinion two or three days ago in the House of Commons without a protest, without a murmur."

The importation of the Chinese into South Africa had no more stout antagonist than Mr. Burt. He was incessant in his denunciation, in his questioning of Ministers, in his demand for particulars of the kind of life the imported Chinamen were living. Then he went out to the Transvaal and saw the thing for himself. On his return he said, in the House of Commons, on July 27, 1905, that he thought it was an evil day for this country when the Chinese were introduced to the Rand, an evil day for our traditions and our liberties as Britons. Having introduced them, however, he thought that all that could be done should be done to treat them humanely and considerately till the time came for their departure ; and that would be a welcome day not only to the people of this country, but to a great number of the workers in the Transvaal itself. There was not, as was generally supposed, he said, anything like a unanimous opinion among them in favour of the importation of the Chinese. He saw scores and hundreds of the workmen when he visited the Transvaal, and he attended a good many of their trade union conferences and their executive committees, and he found miners, engineers, railway workers, and mechanics of all kinds, in fact all the organised workmen of South Africa, unanimously and very determinedly hostile to the introduction of the Chinese. That opinion was strongly held at that time, and he felt that at any rate the Government ought to have waited until the people of the Transvaal had representative and responsible government before they made that evil and hateful departure from our previous policy.

The more immediate motive of his visit to South Africa was a desire to see two of his sons who had emigrated to that country, one of whom not long afterwards died. On his

return he wrote a small book of impressions, primarily addressed to the Northumberland miners, to whom all his movements were carefully reported, generally in monthly circulars, some of which have historic interest and value. They are all delightful reading, these circulars—the confidences of a man to his friends, the familiar talk of one frugal of words, wise in advice, most variously experienced, and fruitful of mind. In the little book on South Africa, with his characteristic and almost too meticulous desire to be entirely fair, to conceal nothing and to exaggerate nothing, he said that the Chinese were being well treated, that the compounds were as good as compounds could be expected to be, and that food was supplied in sufficient quantities, or something to that effect. The manner in which these admissions were seized on—they were really not admissions, seeing that nobody accused the mine-owners of starving the Chinese, or of lodging them in places comparable to the Black Hole of Calcutta—was one of the political phenomena of the time. Mr. Burt was quoted as approving of the Chinese system in the Transvaal. Only one passage in his book was quoted, or perhaps read by those who thus quoted it; but this was read out on all Conservative platforms, and even made much of in the House of Commons. The member for Morpeth was represented as the apologist of what he earnestly and sincerely believed to be a system of slavery. That is the kind of thing that disgusts a conscientious man with political life. It was not the first time that Mr. Burt had been so misrepresented because of his habit of taking pains to soften a censure if there should be any sort of excuse for doing so. The simple truth was that he came back from South Africa more incensed against the Chinese coolie system than ever, if that were possible; but there are still, it would seem, many persons, some in high positions, who believe, with a puzzling sort of sincerity, that “everything is fair in love, war, and politics.”

XIX

AT BERLIN, AND IN BELGIUM AND FRANCE



CHAPTER XIX

AT BERLIN, AND IN BELGIUM AND FRANCE

IT is pleasant to be able to record that Mr. Burt's position as the foremost working-class representative in the House of Commons was on several important occasions acknowledged in a practical manner by the Government of Lord Salisbury. He was appointed—as, indeed, he could not fail to be without arousing just protest—a member of the Royal Commission on Accidents in Mines. At a later period he became a member of the Royal Commission on Mining Royalties, and, still more recently, of the Royal Commission on Labour. It was a more peculiar distinction to be chosen, together with Sir John Gorst, as one of the English representatives at the Berlin Labour Conference—a meeting which had been convened by the German Emperor.

The young ruler of Germany was then in the fresh enjoyment of his newly acquired power. Bismarck was still Imperial Chancellor, but the strong-willed Emperor and the illustrious servant of Empire were being brought into conflict by incompatibility of aims and temper. Their views on social and economic questions were dividing them most. The Emperor declared, with that unwavering self-confidence which has been the note of his character, that he believed himself to have mastered the aims and impulses of the new spirit which was thrilling through the expiring century. Bismarck felt that he could not go the Emperor's pace. "My young master," he said, "is ardent and active ; he wants to secure the happiness of

those over whom he rules, and of mankind in general. Such a feeling is natural at his time of life ; at mine, doubts as to the feasibility of schemes for the benefit of mankind are excusable. I frankly told him so. It is quite natural that an old mentor like myself should have displeased him, and that my advice should have proved unpalatable. A steady old dray-horse and a young racer cannot pull well together. But then, politics and chemistry are different things : politics have men for their factors, and not chemical combinations. For my part, I shall be glad if the experiments prove successful."

There seems no reason to doubt that the mind of William II. was then really inflamed with the idea that he could find remedies for the prevailing social unrest, that he could make himself a supreme arbiter in the field of peace, as his grandfather had been a great conqueror in the field of battle. "Improving," says Mr. Charles Lowe, "on the policy of Henry IV. of France, who had promised to put a chicken into every man's pot, William II. of Prussia would also bring peace and happiness home to every man's door. He would make his subjects God-fearing, King-revering, prosperous, and contented." The first step in the direction of carrying out his new designs was a speech from the throne, in which he expressed his sympathy with the working classes, and his great desire to assist in equalising "unhealthy social contrasts." He proposed, in fact, to place himself in competition with Socialism. The working people of Germany so far believed in him that when he went to Breslau to receive the allegiance of Silesia a deputation of workmen waited on him, in the name of ten thousand of their comrades who had previously taken part in a torchlight procession in his honour. The Emperor was delighted. It was the first vote of confidence, he said, that the working men of all creeds had passed in his favour. Later on, when there was a strike in the Westphalian coal-field, he received a deputation of miners at Berlin, promised that their complaints should be considered by his Government, and said to a subsequent deputation of employers, "I beg of

you, take pains to give working men a chance to present their grievances in a formal manner. . . . It is natural and human that each one should seek to better himself. Workmen read newspapers, and know the relation that their wages bear to the profits of the company. It is obvious that they should desire to have some share of this." An admirable lesson, such as has still to be learned by some employers in our own country.

In September, 1889, the Emperor, greatly to the astonishment of his subjects, "flashed out," to use Mr. Charles Lowe's vivid phrase, two "Social Rescripts," which together constituted a proposal to summon to Berlin a conference of all the industrial Powers to discuss the question of an international regulation of labour. The preliminaries for this meeting were hurried forward with as much speed as if the Emperor had been his own organiser. The Labour Conference was actually in being on the 15th of March, 1890, and its sittings extended over a fortnight, or, to be exact, until March 29th. In his lively and well-informed *Life of the Emperor* Mr. Charles Lowe speaks slightly of the Conference. "It ended," he says, "by formulating a series of pious wishes, or recommendations, on the regulation of work in mines, of Sunday labour, of children's labour, of work for youths, and of female labour. Its discussions had been purely academic, resembling the debates of the International Peace and Arbitration Society. Since the foundation of the Empire, and the consequent transfer of the centre of political gravity of the European system from the banks of the Seine to the banks of the Sprce, Berlin had been the scene of many conferences, but of none like this. It had, indeed, been less a conference than a kind of social science conversazione, interspersed with banquets, at which M. Jules Simon, the chief French delegate, would 'drink to all who suffer!'

"The Prince of Wales" (now King Edward VII.) "happened to be at this time in Berlin, returning the visit, on behalf of his mother, which the Emperor had paid the Queen, at Osborne, in the previous autumn, and there

were grand Court *fêtes* in honour of his Royal Highness. To some of these functions the Labour delegates were also invited ; and thus it came to pass that, for the first time in their history, the polished parquet floors of the Royal Schloss, resounded with the heavy tread of German locksmiths from the Rhine, French Socialists from Montmartre, and burly miners from Tyneside. . . . On the closing day of the Conference the chief delegates were treated to a free-and-easy 'beer evening' at the Schloss, when the Emperor conversed in the most affable manner with his guests, and impressed them all with his remarkable grasp of their subject. Sir John Gorst, in particular, was struck by his Majesty's absolute mastery of all questions relating to the work of the Conference ; while as for shrewd Mr. Thomas Burt, M.P., what said he when asked for his impression of the Emperor ? " He is extremely well informed. He talked with all the representatives, each in his own language. The Frenchmen were very much astonished at the excellent way in which he spoke their tongue. He has certainly energy—perhaps too much—but the Hohenzollerns have always made reigning a business, and have conducted it with the same laboriousness, the same industry, and the same activity as a man pursues a professional career."

The Conference certainly failed to carry out the objects of the Emperor. In that respect its results were, as Bismarck said, "equal to zero." Nevertheless, it had been, as Mr. Lowe admits, the means of eliciting an international expression of opinion as to the principles which ought to underlie all labour legislation ; but as to Germany, "far from taking the wind out of the Socialist sails, the Emperor's Rescripts only seemed to swell them out as if with all the liberated winds from the cave of *Æolus*." But in England there was one decided and beneficial result from the Conference. This was a shortening of the hours of child labour, though not to the extent that our representatives had pleaded for at Berlin.

On Mr. Burt the visit to Berlin had the effect of confirming him in views to which he had already given frequent

and earnest expression. He was more than ever convinced that the superior condition of the British workman is due to organised self-help, and that it can only be affected injuriously by State patronage or control. His mind had been expressed freely and eloquently on this subject at Joliment earlier in the same year. He had taken the initiative in bringing about the first International Congress of Miners, which met in the Belgian town in March, 1890. In doing this he had, as was said, "flown in the face" of the opinion of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, which had declared in 1884 that, owing to his superiority, the English trade unionist derived no benefit from international relations. There were forty British representatives present at the Joliment Congress, including, besides Mr. Burt, his old friends Mr. William Crawford and Mr. Charles Fenwick. Mr. Burt, Mr. Crawford, and Mr. Ashton, representing the Lancashire miners, were appointed officers of the Congress, and the subject of this biography was unanimously selected to deliver the opening address. The gathering was, as he remarked, significant and unique. There were present the representatives of 265,000 miners, united by means of trade societies. But on the Continent trade unions were in their infancy. The forty British representatives stood for nearly three times as many miners as were represented by the whole of the other members of the Congress, the figures being, in fact, 200,000 against 65,000. But a beginning had been made, despite most adverse circumstances. Many of the great mining communities on the Continent were afraid to send representatives. The Saxon delegates were intercepted just as they were setting out to Joliment, and were instructed to return to their homes. However, as Mr. Burt said, the Congress was tentative. It was a great new experiment. Nobody expected that it would at once lead to important practical results. His own opinion, he said in his opening address, was that its value would be mainly educational. He rejoiced that workmen were rebelling against the unconscionably and inhumanly long hours that prevailed in so many trades.

Then he set the Congress right on the subject of the differences prevailing in this country between the legal eight hours men and those who, like himself, believed that the object might be most certainly and satisfactorily achieved by trade union effort. "There are among the British delegates," observed Mr. Burt, "no differences of opinion as to the desirability of moderate hours of labour. The difference is only as to the best method of achieving that reform." The recent action of the German Emperor had, he believed, been inspired by an earnest desire to improve the conditions of the wealth-producers of his country ; but, whilst appreciating every manifestation of sympathy and helpfulness, workmen knew full well that their future must depend chiefly on their own efforts. What they asked from Governments and Parliaments was fair-play rather than coddling, equality rather than privilege. And he concluded with this piece of golden counsel : " Let the workmen everywhere demand and insist upon free speech and the right of combination. Let them trust to the reasonableness of their cause. Let them regard as their greatest enemies, in whatsoever guise of friendship they come, those who counsel intimidation, violence, and outrage. Such advice," he added, with emphasis, "is not only imprudent and suicidal, but in a free country it is wicked and criminal in the extreme."

The next year's Congress was held in Paris, and Mr. Burt was again chosen to deliver the opening address. The meeting was held in the new Paris Labour Exchange, then uncompleted, and designed to cost £160,000. Mr. Burt was able to congratulate the Congress on the great progress that had been made since the Joliment gathering. A million miners were now represented, or almost four times as many as before. And not only, said the first day's President, had the trade unions been strengthened, but greater freedom had been acquired in the various countries represented, and especially in Germany. Organisation was the only basis of progress, he added. They were all agreed on that ; but the strength of their organisation increased the weight of their responsibility. The miners held in their hands the motive

power of almost every other trade. He hoped, therefore, that they would all agree not to act lightly and without due reflection.

The result of the Paris Congress was that a resolution, proposed by the Belgian representatives and modified by the English delegates, on the hours question was adopted. It invited Governments and Parliaments to agree to an International Convention establishing a universal eight hours' day in mines. Both these early International Congresses were very excited, very noisy, with everybody wanting to speak at once, and with an occasional tendency to come to blows; but these characteristics, which belong to all international congresses, did not discourage Mr. Burt, who has since attended all the similar gatherings that have been held. And certainly not without good results. The social condition of no class of workmen on the Continent of Europe has so rapidly and visibly improved as that of the miners.

An elaborate study of Mr. Burt's life and character by M. Gilbert-Boucher, appeared in two issues of the *Nouvelle Revue* in the year following the Paris Congress. It bore striking testimony to the interest which the career and the unquestioned talents of the member for Morpeth had awakened among the students of social problems in France. The writer was astonished at Mr. Burt's moderation. "Take," he says, "the manifesto addressed by Mr. Gladstone to the English nation on the eve of the elections of 1874, soften down what is too violent and passionate in the language of a party leader fond of oratorical exaggerations, and you have Mr. Burt's confession of faith. In vain do we seek in it those insults to the members of the Government, those threats against capitalists, those incitements to revolt, to which the men who claim to represent the Labour interest have accustomed us in France. It would also be difficult to find anything denoting communistic tendencies, or even showing a taste for what is commonly called State Socialism. What Mr. Burt desires is a Liberal policy that would respect every one's rights. On this ground he demands universal suffrage, and the abolition of the laws which produce striking

inequalities between the workers and those who employ them. He wishes for the payment of members, so that all classes of society may be represented in Parliament. He has a firm conviction in favour of free and compulsory education, and that is all, or nearly all." There really was something more, as has been shown in these pages. Mr. Burt was more advanced than Mr. Gladstone in 1874, and what he then said of the famous manifesto was that it was "a new and not unworthy programme for the Liberal party," which was certainly no extreme expression of satisfaction. But in contrast with the Continental labour leaders Mr. Burt's mildness of temper, moderation of view, and suavity of tone, must have been surprising indeed to any French observer. It had only been possible to form trade unions in France during the previous seven or eight years. Would the French workmen, asked M. Gilbert-Boucher, not soon grow tired of being the tools of some ambitious leader? Were they less intelligent than the English, incapable of understanding that their success must depend upon their own prudence and discretion? There were further breathless questions, such as, "Will not liberty of association gradually destroy anarchic and Socialistic influence, and facilitate the relations between capital and labour? Is it only in England, which is still half feudal, that these things can be?" M. Gilbert-Boucher, as will be seen, was looking eagerly, in a somewhat despairing, but not hopeless, frame of mind, for a Gallic Thomas Burt.

XX

LABOUR REPRESENTATION, OLD AGE PENSIONS,
AND THE HOUSE OF LORDS



CHAPTER XX

LABOUR REPRESENTATION, OLD AGE PENSIONS, AND THE HOUSE OF LORDS

ON various occasions Mr. Burt has, at the solicitation of their editors, contributed articles to the more important reviews. These have in each instance been distinguished by such clearness, ease, and vigour of style, so firm a grasp of the subject treated, and such originality of view and power of expression, as led some good judges to regret that he had not devoted himself to the literary career. Undoubtedly, and by a long interval, he has been, as Mr. Joseph Curwen said many years since, "the best penman" that the trade union movement has produced.

But Mr. Burt's contributions to the reviews were still more remarkable for their statesmanlike qualities, and for their foresight, than for their literary charm. His statement of the problem of Labour representation, for example, is to this day the most able and satisfactory that has been made. This appeared in the *Contemporary Review* for May, 1899, and as his views on this subject have been much misrepresented by those who have not taken so much trouble as they might have done to ascertain their nature, and as he is sometimes regarded as, if not a reactionary on this subject, at least a loiterer on the road, it becomes the duty of his biographer to show that he was not merely a pioneer, but that he has kept step throughout, except in so far as the Labour representation movement has identified itself with Socialism. His article in the *Contemporary* commenced with the recital of some facts that are not now generally remembered. It was then, he

said, thirty years since the idea of Labour representation first took form. "In 1857 my friend, G. J. Holyoake, himself an artisan in his youth, and a man who never lost sympathy and touch with the workpeople, was a candidate for the representation of the Tower Hamlets. John Stuart Mill then sent a generous subscription and a letter of hearty approval. The same distinguished Radical supported Mr. George Odger when he, some years afterwards, came forward for Southwark." It was not until 1886 that there were as many as nine Labour members in Parliament. These included, as Mr. Burt points out, the present Sir William Randall Cremer and Mr. George Howell, who had fought Parliamentary contests no less than eighteen years before.

Mr. Burt perceived the necessity for definition. "It is sometimes contended," he said, "that every member of Parliament who has himself been a workman is entitled to be called a Labour representative. That would include men who have been fortunate speculators, who may have been millionaires and large employers, and would be manifestly too wide. On the other hand, some deny that any Labour member has yet found his way to the House of Commons. They maintain that it is not enough for a man to have been an artisan or labourer, but that he must continue to follow his calling when not attending to his Parliamentary duties. Others go so far as to contend that a man is not a Labour member who does not continue his ordinary employment even when Parliament is in session. This in theory," observes Mr. Burt, in his drily humorous manner, "may look well enough, but in practice it is impossible." The point, he went on to say, had been practically decided by the House of Commons, which had accepted as Labour members, without exception, those men who had worked at their respective trades, and who still maintained a close connection with large associated bodies of workmen, such associations selecting and recognising them as their representatives and spokesmen.

Mr. Burt, as has previously been pointed out, has always been opposed to the representation of classes and class

interests, and he again states his objection, remarking that, "the best member is he who is free from class bias, who looks at every question on broad grounds of justice and humanity, who will speak and vote for what is right, though it may cut prejudice against the grain, and may militate against his own interests!" But he accepted accomplished facts. "Classes we have, and class representation," he remarked. There were the army, the navy, the legal and medical professions, the railway directors, the manufacturers, the mine-owners, the bankers, financiers, and landlords. All these were strongly represented in each House of Parliament, and it was necessary therefore that the opinions, the interests, and even the prejudices of the workmen should find free expression at Westminster. Quoting Comte, who said the working people are not so much a class as the nation, he maintained that the working class had never pushed to an extreme the demand for special representation. It had, indeed, stopped short of its legitimate claim. Then, after a glance at the situation of Labour in the various Parliaments of the world, he went on to say: "It has been urged that the workman member should be neither Whig, nor Tory, nor Radical, but only a Labour representative. Among those who most bitterly denounce existing parties the opinion prevails that the working men should form themselves into, and act as, a distinct and independent party. That view is no doubt honestly held by many persons who have a sincere desire to improve the condition of the labourer. I entirely disagree with them, and believe that little or no good, and much evil, would result from such a policy."

And here it is that Mr. Burt diverges from the policy of what, in the existing Parliament, has somewhat arrogantly described itself as the Labour party, as if there were no other representatives of labour. And he gave his reasons, nearly twenty years before the present situation arose. "Where," he said, "there is representative Government, the only alternative to party is faction. . . . The Labour candidate appeals to the electors, and is sent to Parliament,

as a politician. Even where the great majority of the electors are workmen, they are politicians as well as wealth-producers. From its very constitution the House of Commons is a political assembly. Nine-tenths of the subjects which come up before it are of a political character. Many of those that are not strictly Labour questions are quite as important to the workmen as those that are. . . . By forming a Labour party we should not get rid of the evils of party, but we should multiply and aggravate those evils. The Labour member is called upon—by those who wish him to concern himself solely with Labour questions—to give up his conscience and judgment on the great majority of the subjects that come before Parliament; and this he is asked to do, forsooth, in order that he may emancipate himself from the thralldom, the degradation, and the corruption of party. This view is not less insulting to the workman than it is absurd in itself. It assumes that the worker is something less than a man and a citizen; that, as a mere tool of industry, he should separate himself from humanity, from great controversies between individuals and between one nation and another, and concentrate all his energies on matters that affect him as a manual labourer. As a temporary expedient, that might be defensible; but it is utterly unsound, and therefore incapable of universal application. We should strive to unite, not to divide men; to efface, not to intensify, class distinctions." This makes a clear issue between himself and the members supported by the Labour Representation Committee. What he contends is that the Labour member should be as free and independent as any other member of the House of Commons. There is no other real difference between himself and such members as Mr. Keir Hardie or Mr. Ramsay MacDonald except such as is made by the profession of Socialistic views. "I do not deny," he says, "I resolutely maintain, that there are decided advantages in sending to the House of Commons men who, having been workmen themselves, thoroughly understand the workman's life, and sympathise with his efforts to improve his condition. These advantages have been demon-

strated on many occasions. . . . Nor must it be supposed that I am insensible to the value of concerted action by the Labour members. These members now consult and act together on all matters that specially affect the workmen. On purely Labour questions they are actually, as they ought to be, a party ; while on general politics they rightly act with their natural allies, the Radicals, whose central principle is civil equality, and whose object is the promotion of justice between man and man."

This was said, of course, of the Labour representatives who were sitting in the House of Commons in 1889 ; but circumstances have not greatly changed with the establishment of a new Labour party on the benches below the gangway on the Opposition side of the House. The new Labour members are not actually in opposition. Mr. Shackleton, for instance, is not less sound as a Liberal than Mr. Burt, whose summing up is that working men have nothing to gain from Parliament by sectional action, and that their true policy is to co-operate with the party with whose opinions they are in general agreement.

Before leaving this subject it will be illuminating to recall what Mr. Burt wrote in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* in 1874 on the subject of the trade unions and Parliamentary representation. " I well know," he said of the workmen's organisations, " that at certain times and in certain directions they wield immense power, but politicians and Governments will measure them by their electoral influence, and judged by this standard they can give but a poor account of themselves. Again and again their ablest leaders and exponents have tried to enter Parliament, and have failed. Two leaders of unions have indeed been returned, but it cannot be pretended that the unions as a whole did anything to secure their return. I do not know enough about Stafford to say what part the trade unions took in Mr. MacDonald's election, but in the case of Morpeth, while it is true that our own Association prepared the way and made my return possible, it is equally true, as many of your readers well know, that I was elected more on political

than on social grounds, and that had I been ever so sound on all Labour questions I should not have obtained five hundred votes if my political opinions had not been in harmony with those of the great mass of the electors.

"In face of facts like these," he proceeded to observe, "it is idle nonsense to talk of the unions. Let these societies throw aside the unwise restrictions which prevent them from using their power in any way whatever to secure the rights and promote the elevation of labour; let them attend to the political education of their members, recognising the fact that they are citizens as well as trade unionists, and that they will never obtain civil equality by political indifference; let them work as earnestly for their political emancipation as they have done to obtain their social rights, and though they may not have power enough to overawe a strong Government, no Government, however powerful, will venture to be indifferent to their wishes or to resist their just demands."

It will be seen from this that Mr. Burt was actually the author of what is essential in the policy which is being pursued by the Labour Representation Committee and the new Labour party in the House of Commons.

One leaps, at this point, over a wide gap of years in order to arrive at a full and notable expression of Mr. Burt's views on another question vital to the interests of the working population. To the *Nineteenth Century and After*, of 1906, he contributed an article on Old Age Pensions, commencing by a reference to the character of the then newly elected Parliament. He said: "The present Parliament has already shown that it is the most progressive and the most democratic in our history. In its spirit, as in its composition, the House of Commons of 1906 is distinctly a new departure. Though there may be again, as in the past, periods of temporary rest, and possibly fits of reaction, the democracy, having once awakened to life and realised its power, is not likely to lapse again into the deep slumber and apathy of the last few years." Then, as to his particular subject, he remarked: "While we in Great Britain have been investigating, debating, passing resolutions, making election pro-

mises, other countries have been acting. Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, Denmark, our own New Zealand and Australian Colonies, have all in recent years done something practical, by legislation and administration, to provide for their aged poor. Claiming, as we do, to be ahead of other nations, we certainly, in respect to care for the aged, lag far and discredibly behind nearly every civilised nation in the world." He pronounced at once, that is to say, in favour of Old Age Pensions. But he had the worst kind of opinion of Mr. Chamberlain's plan. "A proposal such as his," he remarked, "which demands a lump payment of five pounds at the age of twenty-five, and an annual subscription of one pound for forty years, may, indeed, be simple, but as a solution of the old age problem it is wholly impracticable."

Mr. Burt ridiculed the high moralists who are so dreadfully perturbed lest the aged worker should be demoralised by the payment to them of five shillings per week. They seemed to be unaware or forgetful of the fact that a sum of about eight million pounds a year is now paid in pensions to certain specially favoured individuals. It was never suggested, he said, that these fortunate recipients of pensions, many of them fairly well-to-do, and not a few of whom were paid hundreds or thousands a year, were pauperised, degraded, or rendered thriftless by what they received from the State. "Oh, but these persons, it is replied, have served their country on the battlefield, in the legislative chambers, or as Government officials. That is no doubt true of many of them. But when service to their country is justly enough advanced as a reason for a special reward, on what principle," he asked, "is the worn-out toiler, who has contributed to the production of the nation's wealth, to be excluded from participation in a similar reward?"

Then followed a passage illustrative of his entirely friendly attitude to the other Labour members. The time for dealing with the Old Age Pensions Question was most favourable, he remarked. "The Labour members, now opportunely a force in Parliament, are united and earnest in support of Old Age Pensions. The majority of Liberals, as well as many Con-

servatives, take the same view. In sentiment, therefore, there is general if not complete agreement. The difficulties are admittedly great ; but they are mainly, if not entirely, financial. With unity and courage these difficulties can be surmounted. There must, and there will be, I hope, important retrenchment, especially in naval and military expenditure. New sources of income must be found without throwing additional burdens upon the workers and the producers of wealth. After negative criticism has said its strongest word, there remains urgent need for prompt, effective action."

Mr. Burt's views on this subject, there can be little doubt, greatly influenced Mr. Asquith when he ear-marked certain monies as the nucleus of an Old Age Pension system in the Budget of 1907, for the member for Morpeth has been a much greater political influence than has been understood either by the public at large or by his own constituents.

In the *Nineteenth Century* for April of the same year there was a letter to Sir James Knowles, the editor, on the subject of Parliamentary procedure. It said that drastic changes were imperatively required if Parliament was to be a thoroughly effective instrument in the service of the nation. For one thing, the present House of Commons cannot find anything like sufficient accommodation for its members. "I suppose," wrote Mr. Burt, "that few candidates at the General Election would imagine that after they had won what, in playful irony, is called a seat in the House of Commons, there would be no seat provided for them." The general problem was, he observed, how to make the Parliamentary machine more efficient in the public service. Something might be done by limiting the length of speeches ; but he was not a whole-hearted believer in any Procrustean system of that kind. "I have myself," he observed, "heard a speech which occupied three hours in the delivery. A crowded House listened to every word with rapt attention, and nobody wished the speech had been a minute shorter. But the orator was Mr. Gladstone, and he was expounding a large and an intricate policy." He was rather in favour, it need

not be said, of cutting down the speeches of those who were not exactly Gladstones ; but he was disposed to leave the remedy for too much speech-making to the good sense and good taste of the House itself. "Ours is a Government by debate," he remarked, and he quoted Walter Bagehot, to the effect that no State can stand in the first rank which has not a Government by discussion. Home Rule for Ireland, he contended, was the first necessary measure for relieving Parliament, and, short of Home Rule, much of the work now done at Westminster should be done by local assemblies.

In April, 1894, Mr. Burt had written in the *Nineteenth Century* on the greatest of all obstacles to legislative progress—the House of Lords. He described that assembly as a dangerous anachronism. "It is not alone what the House of Lords omits to do ; it is not only the Bills it rejects or mutilates ; but on the very threshold of legislation its evil influence is potent. Liberal Cabinets, in framing their Bills, have to consider not alone the public requirements or the claims of justice, but what the Upper House will be likely to pass into law." His solution of the problem was the very remedy that is now being proposed by the Government. "There is a strong, a growing, I believe already a preponderant body of public opinion in favour of depriving the House of Lords of its veto. That veto, it is widely felt, must go as the Sovereign's veto has gone. On that clear, distinct, definite issue Liberals should concentrate their efforts."

This same subject of the House of Lords was dealt with at considerable length in the first of a series of addresses which Mr. Burt delivered to his constituents, at Morpeth and elsewhere, during October and November, 1907. At Morpeth he set out his views on the House of Lords in full, and as they are of real and practical, as well as illustrative, interest they shall be quoted here :—

When a Conservative Government is in office the House of Lords is quiescent ; it is passive if it is not helpful. But no sooner does the Liberal party come into power than it becomes suddenly critical, obstructive, destructive ; and it is almost impossible to carry through Parliament the original

measures that the Liberals introduce. Some people say, "Abolish the House of Lords." That is a good deal more easily said than done, and I am not at all sure that I would vote for the abolition of the House of Lords. I certainly would vote for its abolition as it is constituted at the present time; but I think a great deal can be said for a two-chamber system. I will not do more than state my own opinion on that particular point. The House of Lords has among its members some of the most eminent and capable politicians in the country, and really if you went there without any political opinions or any strong convictions, to listen to the debates simply as an intellectual being, to enjoy an intellectual treat, and did not care too much about the outside world that is struggling and working in order to get its daily bread—if you were looking at it simply as an academy for debate—you would hear some of the finest debates there you could listen to. But there is this great distinction about the House of Lords. We live in the twentieth century, and it belongs to about the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It went on very well up to a certain point. Up to the passing of the Reform Act of 1832 there never was a conflict between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Why was that? Well, because the members of the House of Lords nominated and returned actually about two-thirds of the members of the House of Commons. We live in a different time now. We have had two or three extensions of the suffrage. We live now, whether we like it or not—I do like it—in a democratic age, and democratic government and the House of Lords cannot co-exist. The House of Lords belongs to one political party, avowedly—they never attempt to disguise it.

My friend, the present Lord James of Hereford, spoke of them as "a wing of the Carlton Club." I think four-fifths of the members of the House of Lords are Conservatives. I don't know that a lord can very well be anything else. It requires a great amount of virtue and liberality for a lord to be a Radical in his politics. They not only belong to one political party, they belong to one class—the land-owning class—and of all class prejudices and predilections I venture to say there is no class of the whole community that is more likely to take a narrow class view of its interests than the land-owning class. That is the position, then, at the present time, and we are face to face with the question of, sooner or later—and I don't think it can be delayed very long—as John Morley described it, of "ending or mending the House of Lords." Well, that will not be an easy task. Do not let anybody delude himself with the notion that it will be an easy matter to reform the House of Lords. It is exceedingly difficult to reform a youngster, but an old man is past all reform. I would like to impress upon you all that this is an inevitable conflict. It is a conflict between aristocracy and democracy, between privilege and right, between representative government and irresponsible, unrepresentative government; and what we want is that the Liberal, Radical, progressive forces shall be united as one man when the time comes for entering upon this conflict with a House that is unrepresentative, and that is doing all it can to thwart and defeat every effort for the benefit and welfare of the masses of the people.

XXI

AN EIGHTY CLUB SPEECH

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“**N**O Liberal,” it has been said by the anonymous author of a brilliant series of sketches of leading members of Parliament, “will ever forget the month of December, 1890. ‘Committee Room 15’ has left its impress on English as well as on Irish politics. In Scotland opinion was the more excited and embittered because Mr. Parnell had been recently presented with the freedom of the City of Edinburgh. At the height of the hubbub, when the political atmosphere was full of poisonous miasma, and even the Prime Minister, in the House of Lords, had been joking about a national crisis in the style of a music-hall comedian, the Eighty Club entertained as its principal guest the member for Morpeth, Mr. Thomas Burt. It is the well-known practice of the institution to invite eminent Liberals to dine, and to address the Eighty Club on public affairs. Perhaps nobody ever made a better use of the occasion than Mr. Burt. At that time of acrimonious discussion over a disagreeable subject, in which the lowest type of politician positively revelled, the mere presence and personality of Mr. Burt were wholesome and refreshing. Nothing could be more unlike the typical demagogue of the Tory imagination than Mr. Burt. A more perfect example of all the essential qualities in the character of an English gentleman could not be found in either House of Parliament. His speech to the Eighty Club dealt chiefly with the politics of Labour. But it was impossible altogether to avoid the topic of the hour, and Mr. Burt’s references to the great causes which could not be impeded by personal

misconduct was exactly the proper medicine for the prevalent complaint."

In approaching Mr. Burt's Eighty Club speech I have considered it better to make this quotation than to indulge in any similar remarks of my own. It preserves the contemporary atmosphere. It permits us to see what was the impression made at the moment by one of Mr. Burt's most remarkable addresses. The day on which the member for Morpeth was the principal guest of the Club which, as Sir George Trevelyan said, despatches its members to "wherever the stress of battle is, wherever shots are flying and spears breaking," was December 2, 1890. There was a most notable assemblage of the leading Liberals of that time, many of whom are the leading Liberals of our own—Sir Robert Reid, now Lord Chancellor; Mr. Asquith, now Chancellor of the Exchequer; Mr. Haldane, now Secretary for War; Mr. Acland, Education Minister in Lord Rosebery's Government; Sir Edward Grey, now Foreign Secretary; the never-to-be-forgotten Sir Wilfrid Lawson; the Chief Liberal Whip, now Lord Tweedmouth; Captain Sinclair, now Secretary for Scotland, and so on. Many of the Labour members were present as guests—Mr. Fenwick, Mr. Broadhurst, Mr. Abraham, Mr. W. R. Cremer, since knighted, and Mr. George Howell, the historian of Labour movements. Among the guests was also Mr. Hugh Boyle, for many years Mr. Burt's colleague in the management of the Northumberland Miners' Association. Sir George Trevelyan, the Vice-President of the Club, a fellow-Northumbrian and an old friend of Mr. Burt's, was in the chair. He said in introducing the guest of the evening, in a speech frequently interrupted by cheers, that the Club contained no less than two hundred recognised and accepted Liberal candidates for Parliament. Then followed these words:—

I can tell these gentlemen that when they sit, as most of them will sit, with us on the benches of Westminster, they who have hitherto known Mr. Burt at a distance and by report, will find that the kindly feeling towards him which they have gained from the report of others will rapidly grow into a sentiment of deep personal attachment. For there is this about our guest of this even-

ing, that every good thing which we say of him to-night will be echoed outside by people who are not always accustomed to accept what is said at these dinners with concurrence and approbation. Mr. Burt is a universal favourite in the House of Commons, and it is greatly to the credit of our public life that he is so; because he has become a favourite without seeking it consciously; and such is the nature of our guest that I think he probably is not aware of it. Absence of pretension, abundance of performance, unvarying kindness of demeanour towards ally and foe, the unselfishness that never pushes, the fearlessness that never shrinks; above all, a certain loyalty and straightforwardness which is the first idea that connects itself with the name of Mr. Burt in the minds of every one who knows him best—such are the qualities which always will be held in honour by every freely elected assembly of men of our race and our nation. And if that is the feeling of Parliamentary colleagues towards him, men more than half of whom at present are opposed to him in politics—Mr. Fenwick and I alone can tell what is the feeling towards him in that county where he was born and bred—that county to which he has given the labours of his life—that county, I am glad to say, which will recognise with delight the fact that he has been worthy of being entertained by this remarkable company of Liberal stalwarts; because that is the only great county in England which in all the four county seats has returned at the last election Liberal representatives.

Now, whenever the country at large follows the example of Northumberland, we then shall have a Liberal majority, which Liberal majority—just as the Liberal minority is now—will not be Liberal only in name, but will be truly and heartily Liberal also from top to bottom in all its aspirations and in all its convictions. And that is why, with satisfaction and confidence, we are united in doing honour to Mr. Burt, because we regard him as a tried and distinguished representative of the class of men who in the future will have very much to say to passing our laws, and will have likewise a great part in governing the country. What we value in our guest, those special qualities, his public spirit, his sense of honour, his political knowledge, and his varied culture, are qualities which represent at any rate the aspirations and convictions of the people who send him to Parliament. All the working men in this country have not the time or the opportunity to acquire these qualities, but they follow Mr. Burt because he is what they themselves wish to be; and, being what he is, they delight to honour him.

After speaking of the position occupied by the Irish question at that time, Sir George Trevelyan went on to say:—

Among the English public men whom Ireland and Irishmen have learned to trust, and who, by their character and conduct, have done much to create sympathy and confidence between the people of the two islands, no slight place is given—is given, I say, because he never would take it—by the unanimous voice of his brother Liberals to our guest of this evening, whom I

now welcome in your name, and call upon to speak for himself—I hope to some extent on those matters on which he is specially qualified to speak—in that voice which all who have heard it, either in public or private, have long ago learned to love.

As the response to this invitation was one of the finest expositions of his own mind that Mr. Burt has ever made, it is given here almost in full. “I have to thank you, sir,” he said, “for the eloquent, very sincere, but too complimentary terms in which you have spoken of me and of my poor services; and I have also to thank this audience for the way in which it has received me on this occasion.”

It should be said here that Mr. Burt's position on the Eight Hours Question, shared by Mr. Fenwick, and fully explained in the speech which follows, had brought the two representatives of the Northumberland miners under the lash of much unfriendly criticism, to use the mildest expression applicable to the circumstances. It ultimately caused Mr. Fenwick to lose the position of Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, and it led to the denunciation of Mr. Burt in some quarters as a traitor to the working class. These are matters that in this volume will find no further mention. They were wounding, no doubt, at the time. A man so sensitive as Mr. Burt must necessarily have felt the cruelty of blows which were actually intended to be cruel; but no stronger word ever escaped from him on the subject than is to be found in the speech which follows, a splendid example of eloquent and forcible statement of an argument which seems to me even yet to have received no convincing answer. Speaking amid continually interspersed cheers, Mr. Burt said:—

When I look at the audience, and when I remember the men who have been the guests of the Eighty Club, I feel that very great honour indeed has been conferred upon me by inviting me to be the guest of the evening on this occasion. I thank you. There is one thing, I think, that I may promise, and that is that it will not spoil me, perhaps because I am spoilt already. Certainly I shall not attempt for a moment to measure myself with the distinguished statesmen who have been the guests of the Eighty Club as my predecessors, except on one point; and that is that, like them, I may claim to be de-

votedly attached to Liberal principles, and desirous of helping forward the cause of progress and humanity. You not only invited me to be your guest, but you were also good enough to suggest a topic. I was asked to speak on social questions. Social questions are coming to the front at the present time. Partly, no doubt, as the result of improved education, partly as the result of the extended franchise, an immense impulse has been given to social reform.

From time to time those of us who attend public meetings at which working men are addressed, hear it stated that the inequalities—the social inequalities—of our time are on the increase; that the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer. It is all nonsense. If people will exaggerate, if they must misrepresent, they might as well misrepresent by stating something that is encouraging rather than discouraging. But, as a matter of fact, we find that although there are still many evils in existence, evils that we are endeavouring to combat and remove, there is less pauperism, there are relatively fewer persons on the verge of pauperism, there are more people well-to-do than probably in any previous time of our history. What has changed—and I am glad, ladies and gentlemen, that it is so—is that we are less patient with inequalities than formerly. We resent these inequalities more; we are more sensitive to the misery that exists than we were formerly, and I think we see evidence every day that there is an increasing disposition, and an increasing determination to as far as possible remove that suffering—and to lessen those inequalities.

With regard to the workmen, they are more united than they ever were before. Classes of men that have previously been entirely disorganised—the unskilled workers in every department of labour—are uniting and putting forth their claims. All this is encouraging. We are told that they make extravagant demands. Undoubtedly! We are told that the new unionists, as compared with the old unionists, are very rash and very extravagant. New unionism, so far as I can judge, is simply young unionism, inexperienced unionism. The new unionists are making the same mistake as the old made in former times. They have not yet measured their strength. But after they have once fairly measured their strength they will find what is possible and what is impossible; they will walk more circumspectly, more sanely perhaps than they are doing now.

There is one thing that I rejoice to find, and that is that this so-called Socialism is, to a large extent, a revolt against the Mammon-worship of our time. It is the determination of the workmen to be no longer mere tools of production, but to demand leisure in order that they may cultivate and develop what is best in them.

What is a man,
If his chief good, and market of his time,
Be but to sleep and feed?—a beast, no more.
Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and God-like reason
To fust in us unused.

If I have a complaint at all to make, if I have any criticism to offer, it

would be that even the workmen themselves are too materialistic in their aspirations, if, indeed, we may apply such a word as "aspirations" in conjunction with materialism. My complaint of them is that they have not high enough ideals, that they do not perhaps demand enough, or at any rate do not always ask exactly the right thing. That is the criticism I think that I would offer; and I would say that in that respect they only to a large extent follow the spirit of the age. I see very little difference between the vulgar rich and the vulgar poor. Some eminent statesmen have much to answer for with regard to this, because when they appealed to the working men and told them to agitate for the extension of the suffrage, why did they ask them to do so? In order that they might have three acres and a cow? Well, not a bad thing either, I dare say, but not the "be all and the end all" of existence. Even education itself, instead of being advocated on the ground that the working man is a man and ought to have all that is highest and best in him developed and perfected, even that is often advocated only to make him a more efficient tool, a better wealth-producing instrument. "Man liveth not by bread alone." A great poet has said, "We live by admiration, hope and love." But we need bread. We must have that as a basis, we are compound beings, the body as well as the heart and the intellect have to be recognised.

One of the signs of the times is the demand for State intervention in all directions. I am not going to enter into a dissertation on Individualism and Socialism; I cannot draw the line between them. It seems to me that every Individualist is to some extent a Socialist, and every Socialist is very much of an Individualist. We have exponents representing the extremes on both sides. We have men like my friend Mr. Auberon Herbert, who carries his individualism so far that he would even make taxation voluntary. I know a great many people who would like that. (Cheers and laughter.) I do not know how the Chancellor of the Exchequer would fare. It would, I daresay, relieve him of some of his anxieties—those that arise from his not knowing what to do with his surplus. Then, on the other hand, the Socialists would nationalise everything, not only land and minerals, which many of us think ought never to have been private property, but they would nationalise what they euphemistically call the "instruments of production," by which they mean all the mines and the machinery that is necessary to carry them on. I am not quite prepared to go so far as that. I think the State does some things exceedingly well, some very ill. I do not think it has been a conspicuous success as the manager of great industrial enterprises, and that is a department upon which it is not, in my opinion, desirable the Government should enter too largely.

The lines, the principles, of State intervention have been very well put by a distinguished nobleman who was once a Liberal, the Duke of Argyll. The Duke of Argyll, in his "Reign of Law," has a chapter on Politics, and he puts the rights of the workman and the principles of trade unions probably better than they ever were put before by any man in a high position. Workmen ought to be grateful to his Grace for that. The noble Duke points out that there have been two discoveries during the present century; the immense importance of abolishing restrictions on trade, and the absolute necessity of imposing restrictions upon labour. Some of the best legislation of the last fifty years has been no

doubt in the direction of free trade, and of imposing restrictions on labour, such as the Factory Acts, the Mines Regulation Acts, and other measures of a similar kind. I fully acknowledge the value of all this legislation. My own bias, however, is very strongly towards self-help and mutual assistance. I trust for the future of the workmen mainly to their combinations (hear, hear), to education, to co-operation, and movements of that character.

We have had recently a very great deal of discussion on one question that deeply concerns the workmen, namely, the question of the limitation of the hours of labour. I am glad, ladies and gentlemen, that this subject is being discussed at the present time. My own sympathies, I need hardly say, are in favour of shortening the hours of labour to the utmost practicable extent. The first speech I delivered as a pit-lad, or youth, was in support of shorter hours of labour. I have lost no opportunity of advocating that principle. When I have been brought face to face with practical difficulties in dealing with working men; when the alternative presenting itself has been either a reduction of wages or the lengthening of the hours of labour—and wages and hours go very much together, although this is too often ignored—whenever the alternative has been presented to me, as an adviser of the working men, I have almost invariably recommended them, if I saw one or the other was inevitable, to accept even lower wages rather than to lengthen their hours of labour beyond a reasonable limit. But I am against, strongly against, the fixing of the hours of adult men by Act of Parliament. You are all aware what the State has done with regard to the shortening of the hours of labour. I have already referred to some of the advantages that have accrued to the workman and to the community as a whole by these reforms. But the State has refused so far to interfere with the hours of adult men. I do not at all agree with those who oppose further interference on the ground that we have not any precedent. I do not think that that is a valid position for a Radical to take up. I think we shall have to make many new precedents in the future, and I want to discuss this question on its merits; and it is because I believe that the hours of labour can be much more effectually, much more beneficially to everybody, regulated by mutual arrangement and by free combination than by Act of Parliament that I advocate the fixing of the hours of labour otherwise than by an appeal to the State.

I do not say that there may never be need for Parliamentary interference even with the hours of men. When I read the account of that railway disaster—I think it was near Taunton—the other day, when I read that the engine-man had been at his work for about sixteen hours, if I mistake not, much of it through the night; when I see instances of that sort, I come to the conclusion that it may be necessary for Parliament to intervene. I think, however, the case should be a strong one. I think that if you have a body of men who are utterly helpless, who acknowledge that they are helpless, who appeal to Parliament, who are so scattered that they cannot combine; if you have in addition to all these elements the question of safety to life and limb not only to the workman but to the general public, then probably there may be ground for interference. But all I say is, let each case be made out on its own merits, and let us be sure that a case is made out before we agree to accept that method of solution. I do not think that if we look at what has taken place in other

countries, we have much to encourage us in advocating a statutory limitation of the hours of labour. What are the facts? That wherever the eight hours system is in operation it is carried out by combination, that wherever an attempt has been made to regulate the hours of labour of adult men by Act of Parliament, it has been more or less of a dead-letter and a failure. Therefore, we have not very much encouragement to appeal to Parliament. What I have said is true of the United States. It is also true with regard to all the countries on the Continent of Europe.

Now, why should there be this failure? The failure arises from two causes, so far as I can judge. One is the working of overtime. Overtime has not been prohibited, and it will be almost impossible to prohibit overtime. Hours and wages are correlative. They are so closely connected that the one necessarily goes with the other. If men are paid so much per day, and they shorten their hours from twelve to eight, they will nearly always have to suffer a proportionate diminution in their wage. To shorten hours beyond a certain point will, in many trades, inevitably increase the cost of production, and add enormously to the difficulties of carrying on the business, whatever that business may be.

Now the advocates of the limitation of the hours of labour by Act of Parliament, too often overlook that very important factor; and in general with working men, when it comes to be a question between wages and hours of labour, the hours of labour go to the wall, and workmen will accept for increased pay additional hours of labour. And it is very natural that that should be the case. People do not, as a rule, even in coal-pits, go underground for the pleasure of it. It is because it is a necessity. Therefore we have found, again and again I have found in my own experience as a leader of trades unions, that after we have gained advantages by the power of combination, those advantages have been sold by individual men for additional pay. So that, without you prohibit overtime—and to prohibit overtime is a very strong measure indeed to enact—you almost necessarily make your Act of Parliament a dead-letter.

There is another difficulty, and that is the difficulty of imposing penalties making it a criminal offence for a man to work for his livelihood a longer time than Parliament may determine. You have both the employer and the workman under very great temptation—the one to get additional pay, the other to secure additional profit. They will unite with each other to evade the law, and the only possibility of preventing the evasion of the law is to have a huge army of inspectors or of policemen and spies. Lord Salisbury, speaking a few days ago at the Guildhall, combated the notion, the delusion, that we can add to the prosperity of the community by extending the action of the criminal law. Well, I am very glad that Lord Salisbury has found out that it is a great disadvantage to extend the provisions of the criminal law. I am sorry that he has been so late in making the discovery, but “better late than never.” It is a great advantage that the discovery has been made before the full expiration of the “twenty years of resolute and firm government.” But Lord Salisbury is perfectly right upon that particular point.

With regard to the Bills that are now before the House of Commons, dealing with the question of a general eight hours’ limitation for everybody, and

that for the miners, I am very curious to see what the provision will be relative to penalties. I am told that the penalties will be imposed solely upon the employer. Well, that may be right or it may be wrong. It depends upon whether the employer is at fault or not. For instance, in connection with mining, if you pass an Eight Hours' Act, and the employer will not allow a miner to come out of the mine after he has finished his day's work at the end of the eight hours, I think certainly the penalty ought to be inflicted upon the employer. But suppose the workman will not leave the face of the workings, suppose he persists in working after his eight hours have expired, I think it will be very hard to impose the penalty upon the employer. It would be grossly unjust not to punish the workman when he violated the Act, and to punish the employer if he did not.

Before leaving the subject of the eight hours altogether, I should perhaps say a word or two on the economic aspects of that question. I cannot go very fully into that, but it certainly is a matter that deserves very full and very serious consideration. We are an island; but we are not alone in the world. We are largely dependent upon foreign countries, not only for our food, but also for a market for our commodities. If we produced only for ourselves, thousands and tens of thousands of our workmen would starve or they would have to seek a livelihood elsewhere. We are only one of numerous competitors, and our competitors fix the price that we receive for our produce. In other countries they have practically no limitation, they have scarcely any statutory limitation to their hours of working. On the Continent of Europe there are only three countries where the hours of labour are fixed by law. In one, Switzerland, eleven hours is the number; and in the other two cases twelve hours are worked. On the Continent of Europe and in the United States of America, the working hours are very much longer than they are here. If you take coal for example, a very large quantity of coal is exported, and it sometimes becomes a matter of 1d., or 2d., or 3d. per ton, whether we shall go into a particular market or lose it. Therefore it is a question which affects the workman very seriously, as to whether or not restrictions of this kind should be imposed by Parliament.

I do not want to make too much of this argument; I do not want to exaggerate its importance. I believe very often that is done by those who are advocating the particular line that I am now advising. As a matter of fact, the most formidable competitors are those that work moderate hours and that pay high wages, and this ought to be taken to heart by large employers of labour, and I trust we have some among us to-night; when they are struggling and trying to extricate themselves from difficulties, they ought not at once to imagine that the very best method of getting out of their difficulties is to reduce the wages of their workmen or to extend their hours of labour. But I only mention this to show that it is a subject that deserves to be very carefully and fully considered.

One of the things that I regret very much is the impatience of discussion on the part of so many of those that are now advocating an Eight Hours' Bill. If this subject has to be settled satisfactorily, it can only be so settled after full debate, after weighing and examining the question in all its bearings and coming only to such a conclusion as is justified by an appeal to fact, to reason,

and to argument. I regret very much to notice that some of my mining friends, acting, I quite admit, perfectly within their right, are pushing this question, as I think, to some extent in an unreasonable fashion in their dealings with candidates and with members of Parliament. They are trying to carry their points by force and terrorism rather than by an appeal to reason. They are passing resolutions that they will vote only for the member that will vote for an Eight Hours' Bill. Whether he be Whig, Tory, or Radical, if he will promise to vote for that, they will vote for him. When there are two candidates, and one promises and the other does not, they will vote for the one that promises; if they both decline to promise, they will abstain from voting altogether. Well, I do not want to use any strong epithets; I do not want to characterise a policy of that kind; but I think it is very bad advice. When we remember, Sir, the efforts that were made to win the franchise, under your eloquent and able advocacy in the House of Commons and elsewhere—I think we ought to consider that it is something worth using well, and patriotically; and when we remember all that we have said from time to time, and I retract or modify not a single utterance that I have made against class legislation, I think it will be deplorable if the very first use of the franchise made by the workman is to pass a class measure of a very questionable kind. But of course candidates have this practical difficulty to face; they have a body of men who are very compact, who are very resolute, who are very united on the subject, and they therefore find that probably these men have the power to turn an election. Undoubtedly a candidate is put in a very awkward position when he is appealed to in that sort of way.

I am very glad to take it from you, Sir, that there are a great many Parliamentary candidates here to-night. I hope they will win. They have my very best wishes. I do not know whether it would be at all presumptuous on my part to give some of the younger of them a word of advice. I cannot tell them how to win. I am, however, in this very fortunate position for giving advice, that having been a candidate several times I have never been beaten; more by good luck than good management, probably. The one word of advice that I would give to candidates is: "Go straight." You may not win, but if you have a working-class constituency you certainly will not lose because of that straightforwardness, whatever may be the cause of your losing. If you can at once promise, if your judgment and your conscience will allow you to promise—promise at once. If you have not made up your mind—demand time till you have made up your mind. I consider that it is a matter of vital importance to the morality of representative government that a man should not promise until he is thoroughly convinced and able to argue out in the House of Commons or elsewhere what he has arrived at after calm and careful examination. This rather hasty promising also has this disadvantage, that it prevents full discussion. If you have candidates giving way at once as soon as a subject is presented to them in that blind fashion I have referred to, then it puts an end to all debate whatever.

Difficulties of that sort are not altogether unprecedented. We have a very notable example of a distinguished man who had to face electors, and who laid down in classical style in a masterly way the principles that should guide a candidate—the relationship that should subsist between a member of

Parliament and his constituency. I daresay you remember, Sir, very well the words of Burke when addressing the electors after the poll at Bristol ; Burke, one of the grandest figures in our Parliamentary history (hear, hear), a wonderful combination, an orator and a philosopher, a statesman and an honest man. In language which every candidate should commit to memory, and which electors would do well also to take to heart, in a very fine passage too long for me to quote, but from which I will give a single sentence, and which sums up the duty of a Member of Parliament, that great orator said, "Your representative owes you not his industry only, but his judgment, and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

We who belong—if I may say so, Sir—to the party of progress, are perhaps put in greater difficulties than our opponents with regard to questions of this kind. It has been said that there is only one way of standing still, but there are many ways of going forward. I have made no reference yet, and if I do now I shall make very brief reference, to anything of a party kind. But I am not indifferent to party. Party is a great instrument for the accomplishment of great ends, and undoubtedly we are weakened and disintegrated by having questions that have not been maturely thought out brought forward and pressed upon candidates and upon members of the House of Commons. It has been said of our distinguished leader that he can only think of one thing—that he can only think of one thing at a time, that he can occupy his mind only with one subject. Clearly nothing can be further from the truth than to say that of Mr. Gladstone.

But that is perfectly true of the people during a General Election. You can have but one great issue before the country at a time ; and there is already a question that occupies the field, which has not been displaced, which I trust will not be displaced—the question of Ireland. As you said, Sir, the sky is black at the present time ; but the sun has not been blotted out of the heavens. I hear from day to day people declaring that Home Rule is dead ; that we can have no further relations with the Irish members or the Irish party. I regret that anybody should be so exceedingly weak as to take that view of the position. With regard to the Irish party, you have just told us that we have with them common aspirations. Yes, Sir, and we have now a common sorrow, if not a common humiliation, inasmuch as the man that we trusted has shown himself unworthy of the trust. But that does not at all alter the justice of Home Rule. "Men may come and men may go" ; but nations survive ; principles remain ; justice is eternal.

I have detained you a long time, and, with your generous assistance, I have said all I wanted to say. I know how imperfectly I have dealt with a very great subject. I have simply touched its fringes. The labour problem is undoubtedly the problem of the future. The working people, through their trade combinations and by reason of their political influence, have now more power than they ever had before. How will they use that power ? Will they use it wisely ? Will they use it selfishly or unselfishly ? If they use it selfishly they will only be following the example of the class who have had the power before them. But I have faith in my countrymen. I have faith in the working men. I do not believe that they are always right. I myself have had many disappointments, and have had some of my ideals shattered.

But there is one thing I have found on the part of working men, and it is this : they will make sacrifices for each other, they will make sacrifices for a cause to a greater extent, I believe, than any other class of the community. Monopolies and special privileges will doubtless have a hard time of it in the future. They will be swept away, or they will have to give a sound reason for their continued existence ; but whatever is based on reason and justice will stand more firmly established than in the past. With a law-abiding, a sober, an intelligent and a united people, we shall hand on to future generations unimpaired in power and with undimmed lustre the rich inheritance which we ourselves have received from the past.

Mr. Burt sat down amid a storm of applause, and then Mr. Lawson Walton, not then a member of Parliament, but more recently Attorney-General in Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Government, rose to propose a vote of thanks, and in doing so observed :—

One has been reminded while listening to the accents of Mr. Burt's speech of a familiar ballad of the Northern border which describes the virtues of a race of "blithe, leash, and braw lads of coaly Tyne." I am sure that Mr. Burt will forgive me when I say that we all think that both for our own time and hereafter he will hold a foremost position among the sons of that race. To you, Sir George Trevelyan, it must have been a special pleasure to have been borne by association to the keen and eager North Country of Mr. Burt's Northumbrian home ; and I am sure that to all of us it has been pleasant to listen to the tones of a voice which has impressed us as racy of a soil rich in the memory of great Liberal names and great Liberal traditions. . . . Many of us are in favour of increasing the direct Parliamentary representation of labour, and we are accustomed to refer to the public career of Mr. Burt as one of the strongest illustrations and arguments in support of that opinion. Some of us think that the approaching discussions of these great and stirring industrial questions to which Mr. Burt in detail has referred will gather in weight and increase in decisiveness if you add to the number of the exponents who are able to speak the minds and aims of the working classes. Whether that be a sound view or not I think we shall all agree that if the want exists and has to be supplied it cannot be better supplied than by the election of members having the character and qualifications of our guest to-night. Mr. Burt is here, as I have said, in a capacity other than personal. We do honour to him in his representative character. He is here representing a wide and powerful social section—more wide and powerful than any social section composing our civilisation, holding a position which gives him a higher call upon our attention than the claims of personal distinction, however eminent. Mr. Burt has given us an assurance which we shall all welcome in this somewhat distracted episode of our party history. Mr. Burt has assured us of the permanence of the relations of mutual confidence and political alliance which have ever subsisted between the labouring classes of this country and the Liberal party, a relation from which the element of gratitude, as he has said,

is not absent ; and I am glad, Sir, to think that in English politics the obligations of gratitude, and political gratitude, are not entirely ignored. We have gathered faith from Mr. Burt's speech that the creed of the working man has withstood the assaults that have been made upon it. It has been proof against social blandishments and political legerdemain and even the pressure—the unbecoming pressure—of exclusive dealing. The Primrose League, with its seductions, has not corrupted it. The imaginative narrative of Tory historians of the efforts of their party on behalf of labour have not deceived it. It refuses to read history upside down. We are, Sir, indebted to you for some epigrams this evening ; but we are indebted to Mr. Burt for an epigram currently associated with his name, which has been familiar now for some time in politics. I think it was Mr. Burt who coined the epigrammatical classification of Conservative working men into two classes—fools and flunkies. Well, I hope this classification is true at the present time, and I trust that we may, therefore, differentiate as we find the presence of good intentions casting doubt upon intelligence or the presence of intelligence casting doubt upon sincerity.

The seconder of the resolution was Mr. J. Roskill, who, in the course of a speech of unusual excellence, remarked :—

It is not as in a struggle of conflicting parties that Mr. Burt has addressed us to-night, nor indeed as either adopting or countenancing the prejudices of any set of men whatever. It is to a great national question that he has directed our attention, and when we consider not only the extent and magnitude of the subject and the various discussions it has undergone, but the anxieties which it keeps alive, and of which we have almost daily indications, we must admit that it is a question that presses for solution. Without for a moment treading on the thin ice of controversy, I think that a point in the consideration of this question has been reached where the opinions of those who are agreed in principle may naturally be expected to separate and diverge. There seems to be no precedent to which experience has set its seal and sanction that can be held to apply. How to give to labour all the rights of labour, how to define those rights, how the obligations which the State owes to them shall be met and discharged, whether by legislative interference, and if so, to what extent—all these are matters upon which authority fails us and where discretion must begin. It is on the discretion of men like Mr. Burt that the country relies in this emergency. If such reliance could possibly need any justification, I think it would be found in Mr. Burt's speech to-night. In him the working classes find an echo of their sentiments ; to him they look for the fulfilment of their anticipations ; but they know that while he is ever mindful of their present interests, he is also true to their best traditions, the jealous guardian of their honour and independence. Mr. Burt represents more than his constituents. We see in him that combination of temper, wisdom, and disinterestedness, which, regarding neither the fears of the timid nor the cavils of the disaffected, has commanded the respect and won the hearts of his countrymen ; and we thank him for allowing us to add his name to those of the distinguished men who have been the guests of the Eighty Club.

XXII

SPEECHES IN PARLIAMENT

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THE impressions which he had formed of the House of Commons, and of its attitude towards members who, like himself, had no pretensions to wealth or worldly station, were recorded by Mr. Burt in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1889. "The Labour members," he said, "cannot complain of their reception by the House. Whatever its faults and failings may be—and it has many—that assembly is, so far as its own members are concerned, thoroughly democratic. It believes in, and practises, equality, and is free alike from condescension and from arrogance. Let a member know in substance what he is talking about—let him talk straight at the House, not up to it, still less down to it—and the House will accord him a fair hearing, and will make generous allowance for his bluntness and inaccuracies of speech. Probably there is no place in the world where social position counts for less than in the British House of Commons. It may be unfair in its judgment of a man; but it never measures him by a mean standard. It estimates him by his character and ability, not by the extent of his possessions, and cares just as much or just as little for a peasant as for a lord."

The opening of the speech in which he seconded the resolution of "no confidence" in the Government in 1892 contained a particularly interesting piece of self-revelation. "I feel," he remarked, "that something in the nature of an apology is due from me for claiming the attention of the House so early in the new Parliament. I need not say to those who have been members of the House of Commons for

many years past that it has not been my habit to needlessly intrude myself upon it. I am not an orator, as is my hon. and learned friend who has just concluded his powerful speech (Mr. Asquith). I am not even a talker. The occasions are few when I would not rather be silent than speak. I always speak with reluctance, and I feel on this occasion more than usual embarrassment and difficulty—not that I have not full confidence in the justice and reasonableness of the amendment that I have risen to second, but because it is exceedingly difficult to speak on that amendment without uttering something that is not commonplace and self-evident. I never could talk against time. I always have to imagine that there is some reality in the discussion in which I am engaged.”

This was genuine diffidence, as all those who know Mr. Burt will easily understand. He is not one of those members who have greatly swollen the pages of *Hansard*; yet in so long a Parliamentary career he has, of course, made many speeches, none of them very long, all of them to the point, well reasoned and more than usually well expressed. One of the most energetic, forcible, and eloquent of these was a speech on the Afghan Question, delivered in the House of Commons on December 13, 1878. He had from the first been opposed to the Afghan War, and to the rather crooked diplomacy by which it was brought about, and he had addressed several meetings in the North on that subject. In the House of Commons he said, among other things :—

I have not before, since I had the great honour of a seat in this House, taken part in any of its debates on foreign affairs. I should like now, however, with the permission of the House, to say a few words on the important question under discussion. From the first I watched the subject with great interest; I have read carefully the whole of the correspondence; I have read several times over those parts of the correspondence which are put forward as the Ministerial defence for this war. I have listened attentively to the debates, and have heard all that has been said by Ministers in defence of the Government policy, and I have deliberately come to the conclusion which I now express, not without pain and regret, that this country is at present waging a war that is needless, that is unjust, and that is utterly indefensible. It is, in my opinion, a wicked war, and has had its origin in darkness and misrepresentation. If

the whole truth, or if one-half that is known now, had been known to the public a few months ago, such a war would have been, in a professedly free and self-governed country, an impossibility. . . . I am reluctantly driven to the conclusion that there was a pre-determination to pick a quarrel with Shere Ali, or to force him to submit without question to your terms. There would have been one redeeming feature if you had told him plainly and bluntly what you meant, instead of going to him "ostensibly" for one thing when you really wanted another. How much more manly it would have been to have told the truth, to have said, "Shere Ali, you are a poor, weak, ignorant barbarian : we are a strong, civilised nation. You have been very sulky and ill-natured for some time past, and we think you have insulted us. We are a Christian people, and have been taught to bear insults with equanimity, and to forgive even our enemies ; but we cannot afford to do that. So far, indeed, as you are concerned, we might entirely ignore you, and give your ill-temper time to sweeten ; but on the other side of your borders lives a big Christian brother of ours. Of him we are afraid. He may at any moment come over your fields and through your mountain passes to attack us. Now that you have been so ill-natured we must make ourselves secure against that eventuality. You or your friends have got some territory that we want, and that we mean to have. The fact is we have recently discovered that our frontier is a haphazard one, and we want to make it scientific in order to protect ourselves against an invasion that is hardly practicable, and that we have satisfied ourselves we need not dread. It is quite true that this brother of ours has made a solemn promise to us that he will not interfere in your territory. But we do not believe him. He has been as faithless, unscrupulous, and aggressive in Central as we have been in Southern Asia. If he breaks faith with us it is true the logical course would be to attack him, and not to attack you. But the world is not governed by logic. Russia is strong, you are weak ; and if we must fight we want a sure, cheap, and an easy victory."

Now, a speech like that to Shere Ali would have contained a good deal of truth. But such a proclamation to the world would have evoked a public opinion in this country that would have made war impossible. I do not wonder that some powerful Ministerial supporters in the public press should have been compelled to admit that this is an unpopular war. It is indeed unpopular, and it could not well be otherwise. And that alone is a strong, if not a sufficient, condemnation of it. If there is anything like adequate cause it is but too easy to create a war spirit in any country. Governments have before now been almost driven into war by popular clamour. But it is the first time, at least within my recollection, that an English Ministry has begun a war without any war feeling existing in the country—a war against which, in my opinion, the national conscience revolts.

May I say a word about the feelings of the working classes concerning this war? I have never, since I came to this House, unduly, I hope, arrogated to myself the right of speaking on behalf of the working people. I know the House would resent such a claim, put forward by any man. And properly so. Those who are spoken of as working men differ in opinion on most questions, as all other classes differ. I do not, therefore, claim to speak on behalf of all

the working men of the country. It will, perhaps, be allowed, however, that I have good opportunities of knowing the views of working men, and especially of those in the North of England. I am one of them. When I am not in London these men are my daily associates and companions, and I have with large numbers of them a free and frank interchange of sentiment and opinion. I am well acquainted, too, with all the leading men connected with the various trade unions throughout the country. I am in frequent communication with them, and know the opinions of many of them on this war. I do not know one of these men who does not strongly condemn this war and the policy that has produced it. I have not yet, among working men, found a single man who thinks we are in the right—not one who does not believe that we are engaged in an unjust, aggressive, in a mean, cowardly, and infamous war. . . . Reference has been made in the course of this debate to the depression of trade, and to the consequent poverty and destitution prevailing throughout the country. This is so bad that it can hardly be exaggerated. There probably never was a time in the memory of living man—certainly not within my recollection—when trade all round was so bad as it is to-day. Not one trade, but every trade, is seized with paralysis. Capitalists are suffering; many of them are failing; wages are being reduced in all directions; poverty, want, absolute destitution are to be found in thousands of homes. I do not say we can always select our own time for a war, though in this case we are the aggressors, and have selected our own time. . . . I do not doubt that there are among her Majesty's Ministers men who feel as much sympathy with the distress now so prevalent throughout the country as any man can do. I feel sure that is so. Nor do I accuse the Government of having produced this bad trade. But I must say I do believe—and it is a belief which, whether well or ill founded, extensively prevails in the country—that if the Government has had nothing to do with causing the depression of trade, their fussy, swaggering, and hysterical policy has had very much to do with intensifying and prolonging the evil.

If it is true, as we have recently been told on high authority, that the government of the world is not carried on by anonymous newspaper writers, but by sovereigns and statesmen, it is not less true that the business of the world is carried on by thinkers, workers, and merchants, and not by soldiers, adventurers, or buccaneers, who go on a mission sword in hand, to carve out of other people's territory a scientific frontier. Lord Beaconsfield says, "What can we do? We cannot by legislation improve trade." True. Do nothing for a time. Leave off meddling. Let us have real peace and real honour. Let us have order, security, and confidence, and trade will, at any rate, have a fair chance to revive.

I have little more to say. If I have spoken strongly it is because I feel warmly. I detest this war. I fail to see in it a single redeeming feature. Our soldiers are, indeed, as is usual with British soldiers, fighting gallantly. I admire their valour; I regret that they are not fighting in a good cause, . . . When the battles are ended, and the victories are won, we mean to appropriate the territory of our friends, the mountain tribes, by whose assistance and goodwill we have been helped into Afghanistan. Only one thing is required to complete the infamy of this infamous war, and there are signs that

the Government will give that finishing touch to their work. To do this, let them, while taking care to exempt from additional taxation our well-paid officials in India, many of whom have been so loudly clamouring for war, throw as much of the burden as they can or dare upon the patient, dumb, famine-stricken millions who have no articulate voice, but who groan under the military despotism of our Indian Empire.

The speech was published as a pamphlet, and was widely circulated throughout the country. There was one passage, about Lord Salisbury, that was perhaps more loudly cheered in the House of Commons than any other. "The learned gentleman, the Attorney-General," said Mr. Burt, "spoke with eloquence of the need of straightforwardness in our intercourse with other nations. Lord Salisbury inaugurates this new policy of frankness and straightforwardness. And how does he do it? 'The first step will be to induce him (the Ameer) to receive a temporary embassy in his capital. It need not be publicly connected with the establishment of a permanent mission within his dominions. There would be many advantages in ostensibly directing it to some object of smaller political interest, which it would not be difficult for your Excellency to find, or, if need be, to create. I have therefore to instruct you, on behalf of her Majesty's Government, without any delay that you can reasonably avoid, to find some occasion for sending a mission to Cabul, and to press the reception of this mission very earnestly on the Ameer.' We have heard," the member for Morpeth exclaimed in an accent of scorn, "a great deal about Russian diplomacy—how unreliable, how full of tricks and shifts it is. If the most accomplished Russian diplomatist can in these respects surpass what I have read from Lord Salisbury, then all I can say is that the Russians fully deserve the great reputation they have achieved."

Mr. Burt's speeches almost invariably contained, as in the instance just cited, some reference to the manner in which the working classes were affected by the public questions of the day. That was what was expected of him, indeed. Yet, as has been seen, he never claimed for himself any special right to express the mind of the working class. In

a speech delivered in the House of Commons on May 2, 1901, on the proposal to levy a tax of a shilling a ton on all coal exported from the United Kingdom, he reiterated his frequently expressed objection to the representation of classes. "I am called a Labour member," he observed. "It is not my own choice of an epithet. I do not, however, object to it at all, though I think no man should be here to represent land, mines, railways, or anything less broad and vital than the interests of the whole community." There was humour, as well as deep earnestness, in the conclusion of his speech against the proposed tax. He said :—

Northumberland is a large exporting county—four-fifths of the coal produced there is exported. We enter into severe competition with Westphalia. Last year there were exported more than eight million tons, over two millions of which were sent to Germany, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries. From Blyth, a seaport in my own constituency, over three million tons were exported last year. The tax, will, I fear, have a damaging effect upon the whole population there. In many cases we gain or lose a contract by a difference of threepence per ton. I do not say that Westphalia, Germany, and other parts of North-western Europe, being better situated geographically, should not compete and get contracts in preference to us. All I ask for is a fair field and no favour. The imposition of this one shilling a ton will in many cases cut us out of those markets. I have known pits where there was no conflict, no strike, no lock-out, where there was the most amicable feeling between the owners and the men, I have known such pits stand idle for months when a penny a ton would have kept the wheels going. The Government mean to stand to this tax ; it is a powerful Government—in some respects. It has a large majority, I do not know its number. Now with regard to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Professor Marshall, who, as I have said, differs from him on some essential points, says he admires his courage. I myself know that he is courageous, and we all admire courage, even the most pusillanimous of us. But the right hon. gentleman knows very well that courage is often akin to other virtues which are less admirable—to stubbornness and foolhardiness. The right hon. gentleman possesses the genuine article—he has the high courage if he has made a mistake and you can convince him that he has made a mistake, to publicly admit his mistake and withdraw from the false position he has taken up. What we have to do is to convince him, and I hope the Leader of the House will have this debate adjourned to give us a further opportunity of putting our case again before the Government. The Government is powerful positively and negatively. No small fraction of their strength is due to the fact, unprecedented in my memory of this House, that nobody

wants to be in their place. So strongly do I feel on that subject that I have told some of my good friends on the other side of the House—where I have many with whom I pair, in order to allow them to get to bed at a reputable hour—that if ever the Government get into a tight place my pair must be off, because I should like to be free to come to their rescue. I cannot do so on this occasion, because I think they are so absolutely wrong. I fear I must leave them where they are until they get us out of the horrible mess into which they have everywhere landed us.

The result of the General Election of 1892, when the Conservatives were in office, was the return, including the Irish Nationalists, of 355 members who were opposed to the then existing Government, and of 315 Conservatives, including Liberal Unionists, thus producing a majority of 40 against the Administration and in favour of the policy of Home Rule. The Government might have been expected to resign at once; but it did not choose to do so. Acting on its undoubted rights, it determined to meet the new Parliament, as it did on August 4th. On August 8th Mr. Asquith proposed to add to the Address from the Throne the following words: "We feel it, however, to be our duty humbly to submit to your Majesty that it is essential that your Majesty's Government should possess the confidence of this House and of the country, and respectfully to represent to your Majesty that their confidence is not reposed in your present advisers." Mr. Burt was selected to second the amendment, and he thus had an early opportunity of protesting against the misuse which had been made during the elections of words of his which had been spoken in a spirit of kindly toleration of the Government. He said, in following Mr. Asquith's powerful and memorable speech:—

By our constitution and by usage it is essential that the Government should have the support of the country and the confidence of the majority of the members of the House of Commons, and the present Government has not that confidence and that support. I do not think it is necessary for me to make an attack on the present Government. If the Government consisted of members who possessed all the talents and graces, if it was the best Government that ever existed in this country, it yet lacks one thing, and that is vital—it has not a majority at its back. Obsequies have been mentioned, and epitaphs. Well, sir, there is a Latin maxim which I will not venture

to quote, but which is generally rendered, "Say nothing but what is good of the dead." Scholars, I am told, differ as to whether the rendering should not be, "Unless you can say something good of the dead, say nothing." Well, that narrows the theme. I could say some good things of the present Government; but I do not think it is necessary. They will say those good things for themselves, no doubt. . . . The Government have introduced measures good as far as they go; but, as my hon. and learned friend says, incomplete. I do not agree with those of my friends who say that it is entirely immaterial who passes these measures if they are only carried. I have long held the opinion, and it has been confirmed by experience and observation, that it is of vital moment that Bills should be prepared and carried by those who believe in them. That, I think, is high morality; and it certainly results in more genuine, real, honest, and complete legislation.

We have lately had an appeal to the country, and we know what the result of that appeal is. . . . There were many questions of social reform and questions relating to the industrial condition of the people which received a great deal of attention. I do not want to hold the present Government responsible, any more than we as a party on this side should be held responsible, for all the election leaflets distributed during the recent contests; but strong claims were put forward on behalf of the present Government as being in a special and an eminent degree the friends of labour and of the working classes. Now, I can speak with some feeling on that subject, because I received from time to time during the progress of the elections letters and telegrams stating that Tory candidates here and there quoted me as having declared that the present Conservative Government had been the truest friends of the miners and of the working men. Knowing that I had time on my hands, friends said, "Come along and help us. Come and contradict these statements, and help us to win the seat." Well, I knew that I had more than once committed some little indiscretions. I knew I had said a good word or two in support of the present Government. I knew I had made friendly reference to the Mines Regulation Act; but I had never used exactly the words attributed to me. Considering how seldom it is that party politicians speak well of each other, and how seldom the Conservative Government have given me an opportunity of speaking a friendly word for them, I thought it exceedingly hard that when I should say a word or two in this direction my words should be distorted. Now, what I did say in regard to the Mines Regulation Act passed by the present Government was that it was one of the best measures in the interest of miners that had ever been passed in the House of Commons. But each successive measure is, and should be, better than its predecessor. I said, too, that the present Home Secretary had taken great interest in the subject, and had given a great deal of attention to the construction of the Bill, and that he had endeavoured as far as he possibly could to make it effective in the direction of safety to the miners. But I went on to point out that the Mines Regulation Bill was not a party measure, and that, as it was introduced by the present Government, it was line for line and word for word the Bill introduced by Mr. Childers, which he was unable to pass on account of the defeat of the Liberal Government. I said further, that

all the important amendments had been moved by the direct representatives of the miners in the House of Commons, by members on this side of the House, that all of these had received the support of the Liberal party; that, on the other hand, some of the amendments moved, to which we attached importance, had been defeated by the Government; that the Bill, with all its advantages, was less complete, less perfect, than it would have been, on account of the refusal of the Government to accept some of our amendments, and by the introduction of amendments elsewhere, where the Government have a great deal more power than we possess. I find, too, that they claim to have passed a great number of other measures. There was the raising of the age for half-time children in factories, which was claimed as having been passed by the Government, and there was also the insertion of the fair-wages clause in Government contracts. Now, as a matter of fact, the former of these, and, indeed, both of them, emanated from this side of the House, and on the raising of the age of half-timers the Government were resisted and were defeated.

It was important to give this portion of the speech as a matter of history, for the misrepresentation of what Mr. Burt actually said has been continued up to the present time. It is another matter of history that at the conclusion of the debate the Government was defeated by 350 against 310, or precisely by the Opposition majority. The work and the speeches of more than ten years, close on three of them spent in office, lie between this event and my next quotation, taken from a speech on the Penrhyn Quarry dispute, delivered on April 27, 1903. On this subject Mr. Burt said :—

I think it will be admitted that this conflict is one of great gravity. I have known strikes and lock-outs which involved greater numbers of men; but we have had in this district chronic unrest for the last six or seven years. Of that period I should say that fully one-half has been occupied by strikes and lock-outs. This matter suggests, if it does not raise, questions that go to the very foundations of the rights of private property in land. As to where the faults may be, I will not apportion the blame; but blame there is somewhere. I have had the opportunity of meeting the quarrymen of North Wales in mass meetings. I never saw a finer body of workmen in my life. They are sober and law-abiding. Under circumstances of extreme temptation there has been no serious crime in the locality. As to Lord Penrhyn, I shall say nothing except this—that he is an employer out of date. The conflict is going on at a time when conciliation is spreading. The Chancellor of the Exchequer told us the other night that the great lesson to employers and employed, to capitalist and workman, is that they should come closer together with the view of arriving at a mutual understanding.

Conciliation is spreading, and that is almost the only—at any rate, it is the most—encouraging feature in connection with our industrial life. If we compare 1897 with last year we find that, whereas in the former year there were about 750,000 workmen under Conciliation Boards, in 1902 the number had risen to 1,250,000. Is it not very desirable—I am sure everybody thinks it is—that this spirit of conciliation and goodwill should spread over the whole of the country, and reach even Bethesda, and, if possible, Lord Penrhyn? Reference has been made to the difficulty of outside interference. I know how delicate and difficult it is. More than once in my own experience I have found that the inopportune intervention of fussy but well-meaning people has done much more harm than good. But we have had instances of successful intervention. The late Bishop of Durham intervened at the right moment, and other instances can be and have been given. I entirely agree that the State has peculiar advantages in the way of intervening. The President of the Board of Trade has truly said that the intervention must be accompanied by tact and impartiality. Of course these qualities are needed; but courage also is required. He who intervenes in cases of this kind must not fear his fate too much. He undoubtedly has to risk something. He has to risk want of success; but I think it is scarcely likely, in a case of this kind, that more harm than good would be done.

Mr. Burt's proposal was that, as the men had offered to go to arbitration, the Board of Trade should appoint a conciliator whether Lord Penrhyn would accept him or not. By taking this course, he said, information would be collected, and it would come from an unbiassed and unprejudiced quarter. "If you collect and disseminate information you have then a basis for an effective appeal to public opinion, and you may depend upon it that public opinion in its verdict will be just and fair to all parties. In the long run it will compel whichever party shows stupidity and stubbornness to yield to reason and common sense."

The allusion to the Bishop of Durham is very interesting. It was to Bishop Westcott, who was known in the later years of his life as "the Miners' Bishop." He had been able to bring to an end a fiercely sustained conflict in the Durham coal-field, and in this and other ways had so gained the respect and admiration of the miners that they would always fill the cathedral at Durham when the Bishop was to preach there, though they are Nonconformists almost to a man.

Mr. Balfour's Licensing Bill of 1904 supplied the member

for Morpeth with an opportunity of speaking on a topic which had been close to his heart from his early days. He never pleaded on any subject more earnestly than in the cause of temperance. But how little he thought Mr. Balfour's Bill would promote that cause what follows will show :—

I move that this Bill be read a second time on this day six months. This is a bad Bill, it cannot be made into a good one, and that seems sufficient reason for my motion. The Home Secretary stated that he believed it would put an end to controversies upon this subject, and that it would promote temperance. We shall see as to whether it will end controversies. My own belief is that it will open up new controversies without settling any of the old ones. If I could believe that it was a Bill to promote temperance I certainly should not be here to move its rejection. The Prime Minister said a good deal in his speech on the introduction of the Bill about intemperance of speech on the part of temperance advocates. I am not here to defend those speakers. I recognise, however, that many of them have shown very much disinterestedness in devoting themselves to a great and beneficent reform. Occasionally, no doubt, they have shown themselves to be extravagant, fanatical, exaggerative ; but there is one thing they can never exaggerate. They cannot exaggerate the evils which spring from the traffic in intoxicating drink. . . . I find myself to-day in an unexpected position. I never dreamt, in my wildest excursions of fancy, that it would devolve on me to stand up in defence of the magistrates against the attacks of a Tory Government. I am not astonished, because, after thirty years in this House, the poetry, the romance, and the surprises of life have vanished. The magistrates are not a revolutionary body. I suppose the great majority of them have been appointed by Conservative Governments, and that they are nearly all Conservatives, if not in politics, at least in character and position. And yet the Government do not trust them. Well, I must do the Government the justice to say that they do not always treat their friends so scurvily ; but I suppose there was a conflict of interests, and with their usual chivalry they have sacrificed the weaker to the stronger. What is the magistrates' offence? It is that they have been to some extent responsive to the enlightened public opinion of the country, and have used their power to some small extent during the last few years in diminishing the number of public-houses and the evils that spring from them.

Bringing a brief but powerful speech to a close, he said :—

We have been watching his Majesty the King on a visit to Ireland. I read a speech of his Majesty's which interested me very much. I thought it better than any King's Speech I have ever seen introduced by any Government. In the speech his Majesty said, " In the better education of the people lies the one great hope for the future." Well, I believe that, not in the technical, con-

ventional sense, not in the teaching of elementary knowledge, or even in carrying it beyond the elements ; but the development and perfection of the whole man, physical, moral, intellectual, spiritual if you like—teaching men habits of gentleness, justice, and self-restraint. These things Governments cannot do. Therein the patient must minister to himself. But Governments can do something. They *may* do much. They may provide healthier and better surroundings, physical and moral. To use the language of a great statesman whose memory is dear to millions of his fellow-countrymen, and to multitudes beyond the seas, it should be the business of Governments to make it easy for the people to do right and difficult for them to do wrong. Well, Sir, this Bill goes not a step in that direction. It carries us backward. It increases the difficulty. It strengthens and perpetuates our great national curse, and I move its rejection.

Most of these extracts will exhibit the practical character of the mind which Mr. Burt brought to bear on political questions, more than the real but unpretentious eloquence with which he generally enforced his views. That, in fact, is their intention. It is not the least of Mr. Burt's distinctions that he is a thoroughly practical statesman.

XXIII

SPEECHES OUT OF DOORS



CHAPTER XXIII

SPEECHES OUT OF DOORS

ADMIRABLE as are Mr. Burt's speeches, loaded with good sense, full of political wisdom and foresight, and distinguished by a literary quality which is seldom to be found in the speeches even of great orators, the public approval which they invariably received never made of the member for Morpeth anything but an unwilling speech-maker. It may be confidently affirmed, indeed, that in our time no member of Parliament who could speak so well has spoken on so few occasions in so long a career. There was a very considerable demand for his services on platforms out of doors, in spite of that unconquerable accent, at which he has often himself poked fun, although he is proud of it. "The county of Northumberland, in which I live, as you have no doubt found out," was a phrase which he interjected into a speech delivered in one of the Southern counties. Most of his public addresses were reserved for his own constituents, to whom he has given account of himself in the autumn of every year since his return to the House of Commons. "There are probably few members of Parliament," he said in 1883, "who receive more applications to address meetings than I do, and—I say this not to win approval at all, because perhaps, I deserve censure for it—to ninety-nine out of every hundred applications I send a negative reply." It would nevertheless be possible to compile a remarkable volume from the speeches which he has delivered elsewhere than at Westminster. Here it is possible only to give "samples." A speech which seems to me to possess unusual charm was

delivered at Devizes in 1883, in support of the candidature of his friend, William Saunders, and was circulated throughout the constituency as a pamphlet. It is noteworthy, first of all, for the tribute which is paid to Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Burt said of that great statesman, then at the head of the Government formed after the Conservative collapse of 1880, "With regard to the chief of that Government, Mr. Gladstone, I am not at all afraid of exaggerating the intellectual power and the national services rendered by that distinguished man. In the long roll of eminent leading statesmen that have made this country famous we have never had the equal of Mr. Gladstone, taking him all round. We have had perhaps his equal for oratorical power. We may have had—but I don't believe it—his equal as a debater; we may have had his equal as an administrator and law-maker; but we have never had a man who was his equal as orator, debater, administrator, and great constructive statesman. Above all, we have never had a man who has been so deep, so wide, in his sympathies with the great masses of the people."

It was a time, as may be remembered, of systematic and remorseless obstruction in Parliament, and Mr. Burt went on to say something about "hon. gentlemen opposite." So far as the titular, the nominal leaders of the Tory party in the House of Commons were concerned—men like Sir Stafford Northcote, Sir R. Cross, Mr. Smith, and others—his own experience, he remarked, had been that although they were opposed to him in politics, they were prepared, and really anxious, to fight political questions according to intelligent and Parliamentary methods. They would not degrade themselves, they would not attempt to discredit and weaken the House of Commons, by resorting to purely obstructive tactics for the purpose of defeating useful legislation. But on the same benches they had men of another type, who from different motives adopted less creditable methods. One of those specially referred to was Mr. James Lowther—"The Right Honourable Jimmy," as he was called in those days—who seemed to Mr. Burt to be an especially reprehensible phenomenon. "When they had a man who aspired to states-

manship, a man who had actually been a leader in the late Conservative Government, a man who had been Chief Secretary for Ireland, talking in that wild, reckless, and stupid way, it almost made him despair of getting any good, effective measures out of the House of Commons."

The measures he had gone down to Devizes especially to advocate had reference to land reform. He said :—

The question of the land, it seemed to him, was the vital, social, and political question of the present and of the immediate future. It was a great national question. It was a question which affected not only the agricultural labourers, the tenants, and the landowners, but also the toilers in their factories, those huddled together under most unsatisfactory conditions in their large towns. It was a question of the food of the people; a question of the house accommodation of the people; a question, in fact, that concerned the nation at large. Year after year they were more dependent for their food supply on foreign countries. They obtained about one-third of their total meat supply, and about one-half of their wheat supply, from foreign countries, and it seemed to him that on the face of it that was not altogether a healthy condition for a country to be placed in. For a country to be in a thoroughly healthy and sound condition it ought to be able to feed its own population at least with the great necessities, the staple necessities, of life, and therefore the problem that presented itself to them was whether they should lessen their population very considerably or increase their food-producing power very considerably. He did not want the population lessened at all, because he found that when some of their people had to leave their shores to seek a livelihood in foreign countries, in nine cases out of ten it was not the drones, the idlers of society, who left the country, but the busy bees, the men who were the backbone of the national wealth and independence. What was the cure for this great problem? Mr. James Lowther suggested a 5s. per quarter duty on corn. He did not know whether that would be popular among the farmers; but at all events they had not taken the bait, and it was quite certain this was not a practical solution of the difficulty. For what was their real position? During the last eight or ten years of depressed trade, the one thing that had saved the nation and prevented revolution and riot in this country had been free importation, free trade in corn, and cheap bread for the masses of the people. Lord Salisbury suggested that there should be further restrictions on the importation of foreign cattle; but that would increase the price of food. The noble lord also suggested that a portion of the local rates should be thrown on the national exchequer. Now, it was quite certain that whatever the effect of that might be at the moment, its ultimate effect would be to relieve, not the struggling tenants, but the landowners. He did not say that it was an objection in itself. He did not say that if the landowners were entitled to relief they ought not to have it. But he was of opinion that for a considerable time past the landlords had been throwing the burdens that fairly belonged to them on to the shoulders of the great masses of the landless

portion of the population. The only cure for the evil, it seemed to him, was, first of all, a permanent and very considerable reduction of rent all round, and the utter abolition of the feudal fetters that had so long bound the land and prevented its proper cultivation. The landless, such as himself, were at any rate entitled to demand that the utmost that was possible should be got out of the land. . . . They must have the laws of the country tending to encourage the distribution of the land among the many rather than keeping it in the hands of the few.

Having dealt with this subject of the land at some length and with much wealth of illustration, Mr. Burt recollected that he was addressing an audience mainly composed of the less prosperous class of labouring people, and he proceeded to enforce his old lesson, that which he had taught from the time of his young-manhood, in terms the eloquence and force of which will be readily recognised on all sides. He said:—

No man, no community, no nation, had ever permanently improved his, or its, condition merely by gaining material advantages. It depended upon intelligence, sobriety, and moral worth whether the future was to be better than the past. . . . They talked about a man being worth so many thousands a year; but if he had not intelligence, if he was not thoughtful, if he was not sober, if he had not character, he was utterly worthless, however vast his possessions. And it was the same with the working man. He sympathised with every well-directed effort of working men to improve their condition. He wanted them to have shorter hours of labour, higher wages, and better house accommodation than they then possessed; but they could not by merely gaining these things make men to be better men. It still depended upon themselves, and the use they made of their advantages. Without intelligence and sobriety higher wages and greater leisure might all the sooner bring them to ruin and destruction. . . . No political constitution could enfranchise them, no privileges could assist, and no possessions could enrich them, unless they had solid character and wholesome honesty as the granite rock upon which they were built. They had vast masses of ignorance around them; but they had powerful allies on the other side, in the schoolmaster, the public lecturer, and the Press. They might each, however humble and obscure their sphere, do their own part. If as fathers and mothers they taught their children habits of gentleness and justice, they would be co-operating with the great forces that were at work for the improvement of men, and be preparing the material out of which the great constructive statesmen of the future might build a constitution under whose kindly shelter a great nation might live and flourish for countless generations.

Less than two years earlier than the date of the Devizes

speech Mr. Burt had considered it necessary to defend himself before his constituents in respect to his position with regard to the Irish Coercion Bill. He had been attacked by an old friend, Mr. Joseph Cowen, then vigorously at war with Mr. Gladstone's Government. Mr. Cowen's newspaper, the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, was enormously powerful among the miners, notwithstanding that its attitude towards the Liberal party had then been very considerably changed. Mr. Cowen had sent Mr. John Bryson and some others over to Ireland as a Labour deputation, likely to be hostile to the Government in any reports that it might feel disposed to make, the reports to be written by a brilliant young Irishman who was on the staff of Mr. Cowen's newspaper. The year 1881 was the year of Speaker Peel's famous *coup d'état* which resulted in the suspension of thirty-five members of the Nationalist party. It was the year, also, of Mr. Gladstone's Irish Land Bill, of which Mr. Morley says, "The history of the session," one of the longest sessions on record, by the way, "was described as the carriage of a single measure by a single man. Few British members understood it, none mastered it. The Whigs were disaffected about it, the Radicals doubted it, the Tories thought that property as a principle was ruined by it; the Irishmen, when the humour seized them, bade him send his Bill to line trunks." But the Bill passed the House of Commons by two to one. We shall see whether Mr. Burt had not studied it, and whether he did not understand it; but first of all, in his speech to his constituents, delivered at Bedlington on November 9, 1881, he had something to say of John Bryson, who had, not long before, been President of Mr. Burt's own Union, and who had returned from Ireland to attack him, not among the electors of the borough of Morpeth, but in the towns on Tyneside, which have only a commercial interest in the coal industry. The occasions have been few on which Mr. Burt has employed his considerable gift of sarcasm on any individual, as he did on this; but he had been more than usually roused and stung, not by the force of the assault made upon him, but by the manner of it and by its source. His retort

involved a defence of trade unions, which had been assailed because they did not support the Irish Land League. "Those persons do a poor service to Radicalism," Mr. Burt remarked, "who make it the synonym for anarchy and violence. . . . If Mr. Parnell himself were President of an Irish Republic he would have to maintain law and order and put down sedition, or both he and his republic would soon cease to exist." Then as to Mr. Bryson and the Land League. The speech is of so much importance from the biographical and from the trade union point of view, and as a clear and most forcible exposition of a difficult case, that it demands to be quoted at some length :—

My friend Mr. Bryson has been addressing meetings in various parts of the district in support of the Irish Land League. So far as I can gather his opinions he wants two things. He wants to know my views on coercion and the Irish Question, and he wants to convince the miners of Northumberland that it is their duty to join and heartily support the Irish Land League. To accomplish these objects he has gone to work in a very characteristic way. By a visit to me, or a letter, Mr. Bryson could at any time have got my views on any question that perplexed him. But to ascertain what my opinions were he went to the circus at Newcastle, and to nobody knows where at Blyth, and delivered addresses at those places. To convert the miners of Northumberland he went to Jarrow, North Shields, Walker, Wallsend, and other centres of the Northumberland coal-field. (Loud laughter.) I shall not dwell on the personal question—that may take care of itself. I will only say this—no man knows better than Mr. Bryson that I have never attempted to conceal my opinions on any subject of public importance. Though I may not make up my mind in all cases so rapidly as he, I take quite as much pains to ensure that my conclusions are just and well founded—(laughter and cheers)—and when formed my opinions are held with as much tenacity, and uttered with as much boldness and directness of speech as Mr. Bryson's, without regard to their popularity or unpopularity with my fellow-countrymen. Mr. Bryson is angry not only with me, but also with the working men—and especially with the miners of the North—because they have not joined the Irish Land League, and supported the Irish tenants more heartily in the present crisis. The League has been compared to our trade unions. It has been said that they were fighting a great battle in behalf of the rights of labour, and that we should have joined our forces with theirs, and given our active sympathy and practical help in the severe struggle in which they were engaged. If they were actually a trade union, it does not necessarily follow that we should have rushed to their support until we knew something of their constitution, their aims, their methods, and the spirit by which they were animated. I suppose there is no doubt of the fact that, notwithstanding the

tremendous and not always over-scrupulous efforts put forth on behalf of the League in this district, very few English working men have joined it. There is scarcely an accredited trade union leader who has boldly advocated the claims of the League. I do not think any union has sent a penny to the funds of that society. Mr. Bryson, while reproaching everybody else, and especially the Northumberland miners, had a word of strong commendation for the Cleveland miners. But even they only sent their representatives to Ireland, and if I am not incorrectly informed, they left the League to pay the cost of the journey. I saw, too, very soon after Mr. Bryson's speech was delivered, that the agents of the Cleveland miners, when addressing a public meeting at Brotton, used words which read to me very like a repudiation of the League. Mr. Toyne, one of the gentlemen who visited Ireland, said, "The leaders of the Cleveland miners have been charged with advising their members to join the Irish Land League. If the leaders of the Land League gave bad advice, the leaders of the Cleveland miners were not responsible for that. They never had advised their men to join the League! they had not recommended the destruction of property, the killing of horses and cattle, and endangering men's lives, but they advised the people to be united and to keep up a sound, healthy, honest agitation, in order to obtain their rights." Now, with that advice I am sure we shall all agree. Mr. Dunn, the other agent, addressing the same meeting, spoke even more strongly. Among other things, he said that "Mr. Parnell had bought them with fair words at one end of the street, and sold them at the other." When these were the sentiments uttered by those selected for special eulogy by Mr. Bryson, I fear the rest of us must be in a wretched plight indeed.

But I leave Cleveland and come nearer home, and I put a few plain questions to you. I shall endeavour to forget all about myself. I want you to believe, if you like, that I am one of those miserable partisans denounced nearly every day, who place party before principle; who blindly follow the lead of a great statesman, instead of exercising an independent judgment of their own. Think me worse if you like; regard me as a mere party hack in search of a job, and ready to sell my soul for an easy and well-paid place. You at any rate have no splendid prizes in prospect to tempt your cupidity or to distort your judgment. You are honest working men, without hope of any reward but such as you can win out of the stubborn earth by hardest toil. Many of you are trade unionists, and you are thoroughly in sympathy with the claims of honest labour everywhere. You generously helped with your hard-earned money the poor French peasant when in distress through the Franco-German War; you subscribed to protect the British seaman when following his dangerous calling; and your hearts have ever throbbed warmly for liberty, and your hands have ever been open to assist the wretched of every class and of every country. Why have you not helped the Irish peasant in his hour of deep distress? You are lovers of freedom all the world over. Why have you not risen up as one man to protest against the suppression of personal liberty in Ireland? I think there must be some reason for this apparent apathy. Let us see. For myself I have watched the Land League with great interest from its commencement. My sympathies were entirely with the tenants, and I thought it was a grand thing to see a whole people

rising to claim their just rights. Up to a certain period I think the action of the Land League was entirely beneficial. The agitation it set on foot made the Land Bill a possibility. However well disposed, and however powerful statesmen may be, they cannot carry a great measure of reform—especially of land reform—unless there is a tremendous force of public opinion behind them. So far as the agitation was carried on within legal lines it was doubtless good, but at the very outset there were two or three obvious points in which it differed from our trade unions.

Our unions have always in the main been managed by men from our own ranks. I scarcely know an exception to that rule. Now, the agitation of the Land League has been carried on almost entirely by outsiders. It is no doubt creditable to men of other classes, and other professions, to help the tenants, but when we see that nearly all the prominent leaders are members of Parliament, ministers of religion, and legal gentlemen, it leaves room for the suspicion that however genuine their sympathy may be with tenants, they may have other objects in view besides reform of the land laws. The trade unionists have not only produced their own leaders, but they have, with rare exceptions, subscribed their own money. The funds of the Land League have been supplied, in a great measure, from America. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, a paper not unfriendly to the Land League, mentioned some time ago that when the Parliament of the Irish race met in the Rotunda in Dublin, they passed a resolution solemnly pledging themselves and their constituents not only to support the Land League as solidly as in the past, but also to send up to the Central Executive "the funds collected, as soon as they are collected, less 25 per cent. for local expenses." The next week the subscriptions amounted to £1,250 1s. Of this sum £1,200 came from the *Irish World*—a very anti-English organ in America—leaving £50 1s. as a result of the "solid support" so enthusiastically promised to the Land League by the Irish of Ireland. The writer estimated that if only the 1,700 delegates had subscribed, the amount would have averaged but 7½d. per man. So much then for the constitution of the Land League and for the way in which it raises the sinews of war. In neither of these respects does it bear the slightest resemblance to our trade unions.

A Home Ruler when he entered Parliament, more than twelve years before the production of the first Home Rule Bill, and when there were not half a dozen English members in favour of Home Rule, Mr. Burt, despite the virility and the outspokenness of his views about the Land League, was wholly opposed to Mr. Forster's coercionist proposals. He said in this unusually impassioned speech at Bedlington that it was necessary, in consequence of the misrepresentations that had been made, that he should state what his position was on the coercion question. He voted against the Coercion

Bill at every stage. He was, he remarked, one of the two or three English members who voted with Mr. Parnell when he moved his amendment on the Address. He voted against the second and third reading of the Bill, and he voted against every separate clause as it was put from the chair whenever the question of coercion or no coercion was the subject of a division in the House of Commons. These were plain facts that could not be controverted. When did he give these votes that had been misrepresented and twisted, making it to appear that he voted for coercion? He voted against the Irish party whenever they resorted to deliberate obstruction and to perversion of the rules of the House of Commons. He voted against them always when they did that because he, as a Radical, who expected something from the House of Commons in the future, believed that you could not more thoroughly strike a fatal blow at our representative institution than in preventing the business of the country from being properly transacted. His view was that the Land Bill ought to have been brought in before the Coercion Bill. But he faced the situation as it actually stood. In concluding this vigorous speech, which the National Liberal Federation circulated throughout the country as one of its pamphlets, he said :—

You will expect me before I sit down to say a word on the present position in Ireland. What do I think of the arrest of the leaders of the Land League and the suppression of that organisation? That is a matter of administration, and has been done on the responsibility of the Government. I might, therefore, fitly enough decline to give an answer. But I have a very decided opinion, and it would not be courageous to refuse to utter it. I think the Executive have done perfectly right, and that no responsible Government could have done otherwise under the circumstances. I should have thought that they had mocked Parliament in passing the Coercion Act if, when they saw a determination not to give the Land Act a fair trial, they had not used to the full the powers they possessed. I am sorry that any men should have been arrested and imprisoned, but I am glad that the Government had the courage to seize the most powerful of the leaders of the League rather than those who simply followed their advice. But, after all, this is no matter for exultation, it is rather a subject for the deepest regret and humiliation. Let us fully realise what the position is. The most popular men in Ireland are in prison—sent thither without examination or trial. Liberty for the time is

gone. Coercion is in full force ; the country is ruled by a military despotism. Nothing can justify that but sheer necessity. But the necessity, I think, too sadly and too certainly exists. The choice was between anarchy and despotism ; between the coercion of the Land League and the coercion of the Government ; and, for my part, much as I detest coercion, if we must have it applied, I think it is much better to have it applied by a responsible representative government rather than by an irresponsible and ferocious mob.

But the present state of Ireland I hope is only temporary. The country will never be happy and prosperous until liberty, order, and obedience to law exist side by side. There are, I fear, great troubles in store for us before the Irish Question is wholly settled. For my part I have done my best, whatever may be said to the contrary, since you sent me to Parliament, to faithfully serve the Irish people. I have voted for every measure to give them justice and equality. I shall do so in the future, regardless of abuse or misrepresentation. I shall not allow my indignation at the unreason, the coarseness—I had almost said the brutality—of some Irish representatives towards the best and greatest of my countrymen, to make me unjust to a whole nation, and, acting on the principle which has always guided me, I shall ever do all in my power to obtain justice for all men, without regard to their creed or colour, their race or their nationality.

A long interval separates the speeches just quoted from and those which Mr. Burt delivered to his constituents in October and November of last year. What had happened in the meantime could not be set forth in full even if another volume were added to the present. Mr. Burt had powerfully assisted in ejecting the Conservatives from office ; he had been a Minister of State ; he had suffered heavy domestic calamities, such as often break men down ; successive illnesses had brought him near to death ; and he had been raised to membership of his Majesty's Privy Council. And all through these years and events he had been taking a firmer place in the hearts of his constituents. It would be impossible to exaggerate, as it is almost impossible to describe, the depth and sincerity of the feeling which they entertain towards him. They are proud of him as one of themselves ; they have perfect confidence in him and his motives, and their general attitude is that of respectful and tender affection. I went down with him to one of his meetings, at which it was pleasant to see that all the old men, the survivors of the time when he was himself working "at the face of the coal," were present ; and his reception

was of a deeply touching character, for one reason, among many others, because he had lately recovered from one of his trying illnesses. The first speech of his autumn series is always delivered at Morpeth, the chief town in the division. There he explained what he considers to be the duty of a member to those whom he represents, saying that a member of Parliament occupies a very peculiar position in regard to his constituents. Even if there were only two parties, instead of half a dozen, he could not possibly be in agreement with the whole of his constituents. "All he can do is to bring the best of his intelligence, the best of his judgment, without partiality, without selfishness, to bear upon the great public questions of the day, and, according to the best of his lights, do all that he possibly can—not to serve one section or any section, one party or any party, but to do what he possibly can for the welfare of the community as a whole, whatever the views of that community may be."

The railway dispute, settled soon afterwards by Mr. Lloyd George, was then at its height, and Mr. Burt dealt at some length with this and other Labour questions. He said he noticed that some of his friends connected with the Labour party—he professed himself to be a member of the Labour party; but some of them would not quite recognise his orthodoxy in that particular—had been severely criticising the Government because during last session no Labour Bills were passed. He then went on to say:—

To my mind that is rather a narrow and short-sighted view of the subject. I hold that the working man is not only a wealth-producing tool, but he is a citizen of the country, and every measure that is for the good of the community as a whole is for the good of the workmen, who constitute the great majority of the community. Would anybody say that good administration, questions of peace and war, economy, the paying off of the National Debt, measures like the Agricultural Holdings and Allotments Act, which deals with an important phase of the land question, do not in importance equal some of the measures that are passed for the advantage of some particular trade or industry? But just look, too, at some of what we may call the Labour measures that have been passed by the present Parliament—the Trades Disputes Bill, which gives a new charter to the trades unions of the country when they very much needed it; the Workmen's Compensation Act (Amendment) bringing the whole of the workmen, instead of about half,

as formerly, within the provisions of the Compensation Act ; and, again, the Merchant Shipping Act, which deals with the seamen, a body of men who need protection more than almost any other class of workmen, and in having scarcely any Parliamentary power are really more entitled to the sympathetic regard of politicians and members of Parliament than any other portion of the community.

Proceeding to deal with the refusal of the railway directors to meet the representatives of the men they employ, he remarked that he was the general secretary to the Northumberland Miners' Association, and had occupied that position for more than forty-two years. During the first seven or eight years his colleagues and himself were fighting exactly the same battle that Mr. Bell and his colleagues were fighting. They won that battle, and during more than thirty years the coalowners of Northumberland had met, and had been glad to meet, to negotiate with the leaders of the men's union. That had been done with the most beneficial results, both to the employers and to the workmen. He ventured to say they would not find—and as he put it publicly there was an opportunity of contradicting it—he ventured to say that they would not find among the coalowners of Northumberland a single man who had had experience under the old system, or want of system, and who had also had experience during the new, better, and more rational methods of settling differences, who would not say he would infinitely prefer to deal with the direct representatives of the miners rather than with those who held less responsible positions. They in Northumberland were among the first in coming to their arrangement, and he would say for their Joint Committee and Conciliation Board that until they could really get a complete change of the industrial system there was nothing better than employers and workmen meeting together with an independent man to give a decision if they failed to come to an amicable arrangement. What was true of Northumberland was also true of their neighbours in Durham. It was true now of the whole of Great Britain. Every mining district in Great Britain had now recognition of its organised associations. All the great

trades had the same—iron, shipbuilding, engineering, the cotton trade—in fact they could not mention any great industry that had not now recognition and the right of negotiation, which the railway employees were asking for. He could go further and say that nearly all the Government departments recognised the same. There was not a man at the head of a great department of State—and they were large employers of labour—who would not welcome the representatives of organised men to discuss and arrange differences. What, he asked, was the use of the railway directors setting themselves against a running tide in that direction? and the question was soon answered by events.

In the reply to a vote of thanks there was a passage of strong autobiographic interest. Mr. Burt said of the seconder :—

We are very old friends, and I remember him nearly as far back as the time he mentions, though I was not aware that he was present at that meeting in the Central Hall. It was the first time I had had the opportunity of hearing of Sir George Grey, and I have the most kindly recollections of that grand, stately statesman. He and I were exceedingly good friends right up to the end of his life, and I remember that when some of my friends, wanting to back me up, felt it necessary to make an unwarrantable attack on him, I wrote to the public Press to defend him. He was very much touched by that, I remember. I cannot understand the method of those people who feel it necessary in order to back up one person, to run somebody else down. I never like to be lifted up at the expense of my friends. I remember the question I put to Sir George Grey on the occasion in question, because it was the first time I had ever put a question to a member of Parliament and Privy Councillor. The question was as to whether Sir George would support the Permissive Bill. That was then the great temperance movement, and you know which side I have always been on in regard to that particular question. I do not remember the answer too well, but I know it was a very diplomatic reply, and delivered with so much graciousness and courtesy, that really belonged to the man, that I almost felt flattered, and it was not until I got out of the meeting that I found he had not quite answered my question.

One of Mr. Burt's early platform successes, it may here be said, was on the occasion when he was selected to present an address to General Grant, on the Town Moor at Newcastle, in 1877. General Grant's visit to the north of England

is historic. The American Government was at that time represented in the north of England by Major Evan R. Jones, who had himself served through the Civil War. It was due to the appeal of his old companion-in-arms that General Grant consented to accept the invitation. There was a procession through the streets, a banquet, a reception in the Town Hall, and finally the presentation of the address on the Town Moor, witnessed by a vast concourse of people, to whose enthusiasm General Grant responded in a speech which, short as it was, was perhaps the longest he ever made.

XXIV

THE BURT MEMORIAL HALL AND BURT
PORTRAITURE





THE BURT MEMORIAL HALL, NEWCASTLE.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE BURT MEMORIAL HALL AND BURT PORTRAITURE

IT has been told in a previous chapter how, shortly after the issue of Mr. Burt's outspoken manifesto in 1872, the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, more than doubled in strength, moved from its then very inadequate offices to more suitable premises at the eastern corner of Lovaine Crescent, Newcastle. Within twenty years there had been a more important removal. The feelings of the miners towards their leader and representative had then risen to heights of admiration from which they have not again receded, and they culminated in a resolution to build a "Burt Memorial Hall," to contain offices, residences for certain of the officials, and a place of meeting large enough to accommodate any assembly likely to be held in connection with the affairs of the Association. A site was chosen in Bath Road, not far from the old offices, and in the close neighbourhood of the Newcastle College of Medicine. There, as will be seen from the accompanying illustration, was erected a building of very considerable architectural merit, which, though on no obtrusive scale, was entirely worthy of its surroundings, which are, for the most part, remarkable for the beauty and the ornate character of their architecture. The name of Mr. Burt was thus, amid picturesque demonstrations at the opening ceremony, permanently associated with the headquarters of the miners of Northumberland, and the members of the Union are almost as proud of their memorial to their leader as of their leader himself.

Nor was this all that was done at about that time by way of expressing the miners' pride in, and appreciation of, the man who, it is no exaggeration to say, had brought them out of the wilderness. A young and capable artist, Mr. Garvie, of Morpeth, had painted a portrait of Mr. Burt which was hung on the line in the Royal Academy, and this it was determined to acquire for the Burt Memorial Hall; and there it adorns the walls of the ante-room, in which are grouped some unsuspected evidences of the beneficent work done by the Association of a kind known only to its members. In the Reform Club in Pall Mall there is a reproduction of this portrait in photogravure, to which a special interest attaches itself. Mr. Burt was elected to the Reform Club under the rule which permits of the selection of members on the ground of special services rendered to the Liberal party. This was a distinction to be proud of; but the Club paid to the member for Morpeth a further compliment, which was in its character unique. It determined to acquire a copy of the photogravure of Mr. Garvie's painting, which was the first and is to this time the only portrait of a living politician displayed on its walls.

Nearly twenty years later than Mr. Garvie's picture there hung on the line at the Royal Academy, in the exhibition of 1907, another portrait of Mr. Burt. This, which forms the frontispiece to the present volume, was painted by Mr. George Spencer Watson, who had been recommended for the work by Sir Edward Poynter, P.R.A., the commission being from members of the Newcastle Liberal Club, a prosperous institution which occupies a fine old house on the site of a caravanserie much in favour "when folk were wont to go on pilgrimages" to the shrine of St. Mary at Jesmond, just on what were then the outskirts of Newcastle. A circular signed by Mr. Lloyd George as President, and by the honorary officers of the Club, was issued in June, 1906, in these terms :—

A proposal having been made to the General Committee of the Newcastle upon-Tyne Liberal Club that a portrait of the Right Hon. Thomas Burt, M.P. (a past President of the Club) should be painted and hung in the Dining

Hall, we have pleasure in informing you that they have cordially approved the suggestion. It is intended to place the commission for a three-quarter length portrait in the hands of Mr. George Spencer Watson, who is favourably known as a portrait exhibitor on the walls of the Royal Academy, and of whom Sir Edward Poynter, P.R.A., writes 'You may rely on his doing a good picture and making a good likeness.' It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to remind you of the peculiar claims which Mr. Burt has to the esteem and gratitude not only of the Liberal party, but the whole community. Born in Northumberland some sixty-nine years ago, he began working at the pit at the age of ten, and was a working miner for eighteen years. In 1865 he was elected as Secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association, and is still one of their chosen and trusted leaders. He was a colleague of Mr. Gladstone in 1892, as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade, and has sat uninterruptedly as member for Morpeth since 1874. His influence for good in the industrial and social life, more especially of the miners of Northumberland, his wisely directed efforts in favour of conciliation and arbitration, and his signal services to the country as a member of various Royal Commissions, entitle him to a high place on the roll of public benefactors of his generation, and induce us to appeal to you with confidence for your support in our efforts to secure a permanent memento of the man to be placed in the centre of Liberal influence in the North of England."

The response was immediate and abundant, the list of subscribers being headed by the Marquis of Ripon, the Earl of Rosebery, Earl Carrington, Lord Tweedmouth, Lord Joicey, Sir G. O. Trevelyan, and Dr. Thomas Hodgkin, the eminent author of "Italy and Her Invaders." The son of Mr. Burt's old friend, Joseph Cowen, for some time estranged, was also among the principal contributors. When the commission was placed in hand Mr. Burt was slowly recovering from a long, severe, and dangerous illness, and there is on that account some weariness in his expression; but the portrait is in all other respects what Sir Edward Poynter said it would be. It was presented to the Club in October, 1907, Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary, the grandson of Mr. Burt's predecessor in the representation of Morpeth, performing the unveiling ceremony in the presence of a remarkable gathering of the representative Liberals of Northumberland. The speech made by the Foreign Secretary at the unveiling ceremony attracted the attention of the whole Press of the country.

Sir Edward Grey congratulated the Club upon being in

possession of a portrait of one whom, for many years in the North, they had honoured and admired and loved. Where, indeed, he asked, could they have found a better subject to hang on the wall of the Liberal Club, to stimulate and elevate those who were working in the Liberal cause? And where could they have found any one who possessed in so great a degree as Mr. Burt the respect, the admiration, and the affection of all who knew him? Mr. Burt had been, nearly the whole of his life, a public man, identified with public causes, and taking a valiant part on behalf of progress; and to all of them the association between Mr. Burt and the Liberal party would always typify one of the happiest and most successful instances of the union between Liberalism and Labour. He believed that union to have been not only happy and congenial, but also to have produced most valuable results. He knew, he went on to say, there were some people who questioned whether the results of such a union in the future could be as valuable as they had been in the past. That was controversial ground, on which he would not for a moment enter, but to all of them, especially to those in the North, the union between Liberalism and Labour had been one of the most satisfactory features of Liberal work. He hoped it might long continue to be so.

But good party man as Mr. Burt had always been, honourably as he represented the Northumberland miners as well as Liberalism, and great as was the part which he had taken in the public work of the Liberal party, Sir Edward thought that was not the chief interest of the portrait. They had something better than the portrait present with them. They had Mr. Burt himself; and in his presence it was difficult and embarrassing to say all that he would like to say, and all that he felt. After all, was not the great stake in the career of each one of them taking part in public life not his apparent success or failure before the public, but his own character in the matter? He sometimes thought it would be a good thing if they put themselves through a little catechism in public life as to how they were getting on from the private point of view.

Let them take the question of courage. He could not imagine any one entering public life without more than the normal stock of courage to begin with ; but after they had been in public life for some years the question was, had their courage increased or diminished, had some of it been knocked out by opponents or squeezed out of them by friends and supporters? The fear of giving offence to friends sometimes made a larger draft upon their courage than the difficulty of standing up to oppose.

Sir Edward pursued the subject with such engaging candour as made his speech the common topic of leading articles in the daily papers of the following day. His hearers, he said, could be sure of this, that no man stood still in public life. His courage either increased or diminished, but the strain was so great that it could not remain unaffected, and for better or worse he was sure to be changed by the trials he had to undergo. Let them take the very elementary question of telling the truth. When they in public life made a speech they were affected by two impulses. One was to tell the truth: the other was to say what was agreeable to their audience. Sometimes they coincided, sometimes they conflicted ; when they conflicted, which won? So they went on with other qualities. Let them take motives. The public and patriotic motives which they wished to inspire them in public life, and with which they began their public career—had these increased and grown stronger after years? Did they find them shrink until they were in danger of falling back, and nothing but the motive for personal success remained—a valuable ingredient when mixed with other things, but not an ingredient which alone was safe in public life. Sometimes, he thought, in the strain of politics there was much which crushed out of them all the finer pleasures of the imagination which every man ought to cherish and keep. He ought to make an exception in favour of golf. Between golf and politics there was a splendid affinity which made both flourish together.

In this charmingly confidential, self-revealing tone Sir Edward continued for some time longer, and then, returning

to the subject of the portrait, he said that as it was in the beginning of Mr. Burt's Parliamentary career so it was at that time. There was no cause, no question or controversy on which Mr. Burt felt which he did not lift and ennoble with the finest spirit. There was no man, friend or opponent, who ever came into contact with Mr. Burt without coming away the better for it. There was no one of whom he could speak in terms of such unqualified praise without reserve, so justly and so willingly, as he could of their friend Mr. Burt. There was no occasion on which he had felt greater pleasure in being present, and no service he performed so willingly as that of unveiling Mr. Burt's portrait. There was no public man for whom he had greater regard, esteem, or affection.

The compliment was generous and whole-hearted, and, as was acknowledged by the Press of all parties, most handsomely and entirely deserved. On the next day, the *Tribune* said of the subject of the picture: "Mr. Burt is a thoroughly tried veteran, who has been for more than forty years a Labour leader, and for more than thirty a member of Parliament, and concerning whom no one of any party has the slightest doubt. He is recognised in every quarter as a model of all that is manly and straight in public life, and withal of such modesty that for many Parliaments now there have been 669 members who have thought more highly of him than he ever showed any signs of thinking of himself." The *Daily Chronicle* remarked on the same occasion, with special reference to the natural connection between Labour and Liberalism: "Sir Edward Grey pronounced a warm eulogium on the character of Mr. Thomas Burt. It was a deserved tribute, and the Foreign Secretary's words will be endorsed by all who know the hon. member for Morpeth. The first working miner to enter the House of Commons, Mr. Burt has served as M.P. continuously since 1874. He has given to his constituents most loyal and unselfish service. The new Labour group is inclined to disparage the achievements of Mr. Burt and other early workers in the cause of Labour representation. In point of fact, these pioneers did their work admirably. Mr. Burt has

stood staunchly by his order ; he has never desired or sought to be anything but a working man. He found earnest championship of Labour quite compatible with zealous attachment to Liberal principles. Mr. Burt's fine disposition and upright character was in itself a valuable asset to the cause in the early days of direct representation, when the governing classes were unsympathetic to Labour. In him gentleness was combined most attractively with courage. The House of Commons is a great judge of character, and this honest, simple-hearted, modest man soon won a high place in its esteem. It is often said that political life makes a man a cynic. Mr. Burt is a living monument to the contrary. After thirty years in the House of Commons his heart is still fresh, his enthusiasm still ardent, his nature untouched by bitterness. A career like that of Mr. Burt, so pure in its aim, so free from all taint of self-seeking, is a precious example in our public life at a time when meretricious arts are far too common." The *Spectator* of the following Saturday said of Sir Edward Grey that he could not have had a better text for his address than the Parliamentary life of Mr. Burt. "Mr. Burt was the first working miner to enter Parliament, and since 1874 he has represented the same constituency without a check. In that long period he has not once done anything to forfeit the high esteem which he has inspired in all parts of the House, but, on the contrary, has grown in favour even as he has increased in knowledge and wisdom. The secret of his honourable career, to our way of thinking, is that he has not been merely a representative of Labour. True, he has pleaded the cause of his constituents with unfailing effect, complementing courage with tact, and persistence with mastery of his subject ; but besides being a delegate of a particular interest, he has been an all-round politician, of broad sympathies and enlightened patriotism. Mr. Burt has long been cited, even by his political opponents in the House of Commons, as a Labour leader *sans peur et sans reproche*."

"It is the fashion among Socialist members," the *Spectator* continued, "to depreciate the methods and services of Mr.

Burt. Of course, we do not expect Socialists to agree with us ; but Mr. Burt's political character is precisely the one which we think Labour, in its own interests, ought to imitate and perpetuate. Mr. Burt has never supposed that concern for the affairs of his trade union precluded concern for the general affairs of the country."

Mr. Burt's deep feeling on the occasion of the presentation sufficiently accounts for the brevity of his reply to the speech of the Foreign Secretary. Probably a chapter of autobiography was expected, a review of his political career, or at least a series of reminiscences of the stirring political life of the North of England during his own participation in it. What he actually said was that on many other occasions the committee of the Club and the members had showered kindnesses and appreciation upon him. He very cordially thanked them, and on that occasion the pleasure had been considerably enhanced by the fact that the committee of the Club had recognised Mrs. Burt also, and were about to present a replica of the portrait to her. He always felt—he did not know how other people might feel, but when words of kindness and commendation were uttered on his behalf, he always felt humiliated. That was a rather curious term to use, but he always felt he was so far short of the kind, generous things his friends attributed to him. Sir Edward and he were very old friends. They agreed in the main, if not entirely, on political and social questions. He very cordially thanked Sir Edward Grey, who, in the midst of great and absorbing affairs of State of international moment had been kind enough to find time to come there to unveil the portrait on that occasion. Sir Edward had referred to the artist, whose name was Spencer Watson. Well, that suggested memories, especially to North-countrymen, that they would not easily forget. It suggested the name of a man who was honoured by North-country folks, and not only by people in those Northern parts, but by everybody throughout the country, and even by people of other lands. The allusion was, of course, to Dr. Spence Watson, whose great services to Liberalism had also earned for him the honour of promo-

tion to the Privy Council. In conclusion, said Mr. Burt, he thanked them all for the great honour they had conferred upon him. That picture would take its place by the side of much more distinguished men than he. It would take its place in that fine old building, with its historical associations and its grand memories; and it would be seen after the original had passed away. Whether it was looked at by those who knew him, or never saw him, he could only hope that, as Sir Edward Grey had said, it might afford some little stimulus and encouragement to those who were trying to do their best, and that people generally would remember him as one who loved, and endeavoured to the best of his ability, to serve his fellow-man and to make the future better than the past.

The portrait hangs in a conspicuous place in the spacious dining-room, in company with similarly large portraits of Dr. Spence Watson and Mr. Gladstone. With the Newcastle Liberal Club Mr. Burt has associations of particular closeness. He has been one of its main pillars since its foundation, nearly thirty years since, and his name is inscribed on the brass panel which contains the very remarkable list of its Presidents. The occasion of the presentation of the portrait was by no means the first "function" at which he was the principal figure. The Club has repeatedly honoured itself by emphasising its regard and admiration for one who has remained staunch through so many political convulsions, and has always been dependable when some other local leaders were falling away.

XXV

AND LAST



CHAPTER XXV

AND LAST

THE subject of this biography has now retired from the storm and stress of the political arena. Though he is still a member of Parliament, he is now, by preference, a spectator where he was formerly an actor. He who in times past sat on the Treasury Bench is in these days in love with the shadowy obscurity under the Peers' Gallery. There is, nevertheless, no more assiduously attentive member of the House of Commons, and there would be none more ready to take his place again in the fighting ranks should the trumpet sound for the onset in one of the great causes from the service of which he has never at any moment swerved.

In this final chapter there remains something to be said of some of the main incidents of his career. I have spoken of the work he has done on Royal Commissions of great importance—the Labour Commission, in particular, performing an immense task, sitting over an unusually long period, and producing voluminous reports which are mines of information concerning the conditions of labour throughout all the industrial countries of the world. In June, 1891, the Prince of Wales, now King Edward VII., paid him the compliment of appointing him as one of the Governors of the Imperial Institute. In the following year Mr. Burt took his place on the Government Front Bench as one of the members of Mr. Gladstone's last Administration. He was appointed to the position of Secretary to the Board of Trade in August, 1892. In one of the latest of his political romances Lord Beaconsfield makes one of his characters expatiate on the glorious opportunities of "the Under-Secretary whose

chief is in the House of Lords." We have a current instance of how vastly important such a position may become in the case of Mr. Winston Churchill. Mr. Burt was not an Under-Secretary, but his chief was in the House of Commons. In the first instance it was Mr. A. J. Mundella, and when that stalwart old Radical was driven out of the Government by an attack of the nature of which its authors must soon have become heartily ashamed, Mr. Bryce became President of the Board of Trade. Under neither of these chiefs was much showy work left for Mr. Burt to do. He was the hard-working official throughout, and he worked remorselessly, as he was bound to do if the duties of his office were to be faithfully discharged, but as he would have done in any case so long as there was work at hand. Since those days the Secretary of the Board of Trade has been relieved of a part of his burden. The Fisheries Department has, somewhat oddly, been joined up with the Board of Agriculture. In Mr. Burt's day it was just as inappropriately associated with the Board of Trade. The consequence was that the Secretary of that department had to be prepared to answer questions, and, if need be, to make speeches, on such matters as the Tweed Acts. As a matter of fact, in the course of a few days of the year in which the Liberal Government was defeated by what was called the "scratch" vote he had to deal in the House of Commons with Cattle Weighing Machines, Conciliation (Trade Disputes)—a subject much more within the range of his interests—a Fisheries Act Amendment Bill, Pilot and Distress Signals, Trade and Navigation Returns, and other widely unrelated and miscellaneous matters. On looking back, one wonders why Mr. Burt was put in a position like that. The saying about a round peg in a square hole has seldom been more aptly illustrated. The work of the office was nevertheless very earnestly and conscientiously performed, Mr. Burt, at the same time, serving the Northumberland miners as formerly, though, as I have already stated, he had, on accepting a place in the Ministry, renounced his salary as Secretary of the Association.

What happened when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Government was formed I am not in a position to state. What may be said with perfect confidence is that Mr. Burt was not among those who solicited office, and he will not himself say whether, as is probable, he declined it. His place should, without doubt, have been in the Cabinet. In his own field of statesmanship he has achieved more than most Prime Ministers in theirs. His ripe wisdom is a national asset. But Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman had such abundant materials for forming a Ministry. Possibly Mr. Burt would not accept the post that was offered to him, or any one of a choice of posts. Of this, I repeat, I know nothing. What I do know is that he nurses no grievance, that he is as whole-hearted a supporter of the present Ministry as he was of the Liberal Ministries that were its predecessors, and that he is enjoying, and gaining health from, the period of rest on which he has fallen.

Could anything be more remarkable than that two Northumberland miners, close and dear friends, should, the one be raised to the Privy Council, and the other made a Deputy-Chairman of the House of Commons? Mr. Charles Fenwick was even more directly dug out of the pit than Mr. Burt. He was scarcely known at all as a political speaker when he was selected as the candidate for the Wansbeck Division of Northumberland, and he is now recognised as one of the most competent of those who are occasionally called upon to preside over the proceedings of the Representative Chamber. It will not be disputed that the miners of Northumberland, when they chose members of Parliament from their own class, chose them with a most extraordinary discretion.

Hopeless as was any attempt to unseat him, Mr. Burt has nevertheless had to fight for his seat on the occurrence of most General Elections since 1874. The idea was to keep him occupied in his own constituency, so that he might not be wholly at liberty to go about assisting candidates elsewhere. The corollary of this was that such candidates as were sent down to Morpeth were those who seemed to have

no chance anywhere else. His majorities usually ran into some thousands ; but in 1902, when the country was in the grip of the war fever, he defeated Mr. Maltman Barry by only 410 votes. Then came the reaction, of course. In 1906 his majority was 3,599. It was on the occasion of this election that a small Morpeth boy exhibited his intense enthusiasm for one whom he considered to be his own member. "Good old Tommy Bort !" he cried, flinging his headgear into the air, "Good old Tommy Bort !" and then, after a pause, and feeling that something more was necessary, "Good old General Bort !" It appears that General Booth had been through the town not long before, and the small Morpeth lad, having heard that some new title had been conferred on his member, and not knowing what it was, ungrudgingly conferred on him the highest titular honour with which he was acquainted.

Mr. Burt's public career began in just such humble ways as corresponded with his birth and his employment. He was local organiser, day-school secretary, lecturer on temperance, trade unionism, arbitration, education, and co-operation. These were the unpaid employments of a strictly limited leisure. In all these causes he has worked unceasingly from then till now. More especially has he been insistent on the necessity of education for the working man, not to raise him out of his employment, but to make him more fit for it. He said at Choppington, an important part of his constituency, in 1874 : "I spent several of the most pleasant years of my life at Choppington Colliery. I liked the men, and I liked the employers better than any employers I had ever worked for since I had commenced to labour as a working man. . . . You and I met together in this very place thirteen years ago to inaugurate the school system." Another quotation must be made to illustrate the earnestness and the eloquence of his appeal to the workmen to educate themselves and their children. It is from a speech at Blyth, in 1876, in which he told the pitmen that if there were not so many "blue Mondays" there would not be so many "sky-blue Tuesdays." He added :—

Education is no longer the luxury of the few ; it belongs exclusively to no one class, to no special period of life. It is broad as humanity, and, rightly considered, it is the greatest business of life. We speak of finishing our education by attending school a few short years. Let us get that nonsense out of our heads, or we shall not merely stand still, but we shall go backward and downward with ever-accelerating speed. Let me exhort you all, young and old alike, to commence in earnest, if you have not yet commenced, and to carry on vigorously, if you have already begun, the great work of self-culture. To the young I would specially appeal. Now is the great seed-time of life for you. You are forming habits that will probably cling to you to the end of your existence, and that will go far to determine your whole future destiny. Set a high object before you. Resolve that you will make it the great business of life to seek for truth above everything, to welcome it from whatever quarter it may come, to follow it whithersoever it may lead. However it may humble your pride, however it may cut against the grain of your prejudice, however it may militate against your apparent interest, let me urge you to build up a strong, manly character, to develop to the utmost the high powers with which you are endowed. I cannot say you will find this a light and easy task. You will require courage, determination, the strong will, the resolute heart. You will have to "scorn delights and live laborious days." But you will win other delights, of a higher, purer, and more ennobling kind ; and I can promise that in the end you will have a sure, a lasting, and a glorious reward.

Among those who heard or read these words were those young Northumbrian miners who were the first working men to be selected, as the result of examinations on University Extension Lectures, to be sent up to Ruskin Hall, at Oxford.

The total effect of a life like that of Thomas Burt cannot be measured. We can only note some of the milestones. He first made possible an effective union among the miners ; he set the example which made of trade unionism something more than a mere fighting force ; he procured the acceptance of a system of conciliation in trade disputes which finds its finest expression in the Joint Committees of Northumberland and Durham ; he stimulated, and almost originated, union among the coal-miners of the Continent. These are only a few of his achievements. Perhaps it is even more to the good that he has been the advocate of high principles, each one of which is now a part of the creed of all Labour organisations. "Workmen," he said, in regard to Parliament, "do not want class legislation. What they object to is class exclusiveness."

"I say that labour, rightly considered, has no interests which are not those of the community at large." "My contention is that working men have nothing to gain from Parliament by sectional action; that their true policy is to co-operate with the party with whose opinions they are in general agreement." "Organisation is the basis of all progress." "Let the workmen everywhere demand and insist upon the free speech and the right of combination," but also, "let them trust to the reasonableness of their cause," and remember—always remember—that their progress depends on their own efforts. He said in the House of Commons, in 1875, that there was a strong feeling against working men being taken before local magistrates, "but," he added, "I should object to employers being taken before working men." The same keen sense of fairness exhibited itself in his advocacy of local veto. "I ask hon. members who profess to have an earnest desire to protect and take care of the interest of the working classes to show their confidence in and their respect for the working men by allowing them to say for themselves whether or not they want beer, or to have it forced upon them when they do not want it, and to be prevented from obtaining it, when, perhaps, they would rather like to have it?"

It remains to be said that in the largest and fullest sense Thomas Burt has always been an independent politician. He was never asked for a party pledge, and he never gave one. He has always kept his own undeviating course. He has throughout been a man of strict views, and he has adhered to them under all circumstances. "Whatever record leaps to light, he never will be shamed." He has not merely neglected the main chance: he has scorned it. To say that he has put duty first would not be to praise him. He has "followed the gleam." To give up what would have been a personal advantage has not, by him, been regarded as a sacrifice. He thinks of himself neither as hero nor martyr; nor that he has lived a great life and set a great example. He is pleased to have been useful, content that others should think so, and mildly but steadfastly impatient of praise.

SUPPLEMENTARY

I

MR. BURT'S MONTHLY CIRCULARS

IT has been remarked in the body of this work that Mr. Burt has been in the habit, for many years, of addressing a monthly circular to the members of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association. In these small publications, generally of eight pages, he has discussed all labour questions as they arose, and the whole series of circulars is, therefore, a continuous comment on labour movements over the greater part of half a century. From some of the more recent of these are made the quotations which follows:—

LORD CLAUD HAMILTON'S MANIFESTO.

Two events of importance have occurred within the last few days. Lord Claud Hamilton has issued an official manifesto on behalf of the Great Eastern Railway Company, and the President of the Board of Trade has invited the chairmen of the chief companies to meet him in conference—an invitation which has been accepted. Lord Claud Hamilton holds a great position in the railway world. He is a man of ability, but it cannot be said that the document he has written proves him to be a judicious or tactful spokesman for the companies. His lordship, instead of grappling at close quarters with the claim of the workers, launches out into a wild, indiscriminate diatribe against trade unionism and Socialism in general. "The demand for recognition," he says, "is only the first move in a deep-laid campaign directed not only by the Amalgamated Society, but by the socialistic forces, impelling other trade unions against individualism and capitalism as it exists at present." To confound trade unionists with Socialists, and to class Mr. Bell with the Socialists, is manifestly ridiculous to any person acquainted with the facts. No wonder that Lord C. Hamilton's declaration has been coldly received, as we are told it has been, by many of his brother railway directors. To practically

avow that the conflict is directed against trade unionism, and to confuse Socialism with trade unionism, is a tactical blunder of the grossest kind.

Another argument upon which stress is laid is that recognition of the union would interfere with discipline, and would be a source of danger to the public. This is more plausible than valid. It will not bear close examination. In the case of other occupations—mining, for instance—not less dangerous than employment on railways, the recognition of the unions by the employers has not led the workmen to interfere with discipline, or with matters affecting safety. Why should it? To so interfere would endanger the workmen's own lives and limbs, since the workers themselves run greater risks than anybody else. On railways there is indeed a terrible sacrifice of life, but, after all, the killed and maimed among the employees vastly exceed in number those of the general public. The union itself would stoutly resent any interference which would involve danger, and if it acted otherwise it would speedily and justly forfeit every claim to public sympathy and support.

THE RAILWAY SETTLEMENT.

In my last Circular I wrote at some length under the heading "The Railway Crisis." I am happy now to be able to alter the word crisis into settlement. I said then that, though it was possible to indulge the hope that a peaceful solution might be found, yet there was some risk of a serious conflict. Happily that risk has been averted, and a scheme has been arranged which, if nothing unforeseen happens, is likely to secure peaceful relations between the railway companies and their employees for many years to come. . . . The arrangement has been received with general satisfaction not only by the parties immediately concerned, but by the public and by the leaders and members of most of the trade unions throughout the country. Criticisms, of course, there have been, but so far as I have observed they have come mainly from persons who have had no great experience in grappling with and adjusting differences between employers and workmen. It is quite true that everything asked by the workmen has not been obtained in the precise form claimed, but, on the other hand, the railway companies have receded from their original position. Wisely and carefully worked, the scheme agreed to is likely to be of great advantage to the railway employees, by lessening friction and by affording a speedier and more effective means of settling differences than has existed in the past. At our recent Council Meeting a resolution was spontaneously adopted—passed, too, with complete unanimity and great cordiality—congratulating Mr. Lloyd George on the admirable part played by him in the settlement effected. The compliment was in every sense well merited. Those of us who have had to handle these labour problems at close quarters can form some notion of the great qualities of tact, patience, judgment, firmness, and courage which were required to bring together and to harmonise parties so widely sundered as were the railway directors and the railway workers' union. Fortunately the qualities needed were possessed in a pre-eminent degree by the President of the Board of Trade. A cordial word of commendation is also due to Mr. Richard Bell, M.P., and his colleagues, who throughout a long and trying agitation, and throughout

the difficult negotiations which followed, acted with unfailing tact, moderation, sound judgment, and resolution.

A STRIKE AVERTED. (*September, 1907.*)

There is, unhappily, much unrest at present in some of the largest and most important of our industries. The railway employees and the members of the Boilermakers' Society are both, at the time I write, balloting on the question of a general stoppage of work. Both Societies cover a wide area, and a strike or lock-out of either, or both, would be nothing short of a national calamity. On a smaller scale, we ourselves are having more or less disturbance. Several collieries—including some of our largest—have tendered their notices to compel the non-unionists to enter our Association. Some of these difficulties have been settled—others are apparently likely to be settled without serious friction. I hope that will be so. One result of the agitation has been a great accession of members to our union. As a strong believer in the value of combination I rejoice at this. But I won't pretend to approve of this method of bringing men into the Union. It is well known that I have always opposed and deprecated coercion, whether resorted to by employers or workmen. "Who overcomes by force hath overcome but half his foe." I shall not, however, argue the question, partly because I do not think it is arguable. But there is one aspect of it which is worthy of consideration. Should we drift into a strike on a matter of the kind, the conflict will not be at one or two collieries only, but, in all probability, it will be a general engagement along the whole line between the two associations. I hope, and I believe, that this will not occur.

The withdrawal of the notices at Ashington Colliery ends for the time, and I hope finally, so far as the particular method adopted is concerned, the agitation on the non-union question. Fortunately we have at present no collieries with their notices in on that, or, indeed, on any other subject. As a result of the agitation, there has been a great accession to the membership of the union—over 800 men and boys having joined at Ashington alone. Still this process of conversion is not one that it would be either just or wise to repeat. At Ashington, and some other places, we came too near a stoppage to be pleasant. Had a strike ensued there is every reason to believe that the whole county would have been involved in the struggle. In that case our position would have been utterly indefensible. Happily the conflict was averted, largely averted, let it be frankly recognised, by the exhibition, at the last moment, of great good sense and good feeling by the men themselves, and by the local officials of the Association. For the non-unionist I have nothing to say. As a rule he reaps where he has not sown, and is always ready to take benefits without making sacrifices. But a quarrel of the kind is purely domestic, is between workman and workman, not between workman and employer. From the employers on a matter of this kind we have no right to ask anything more than fairplay. We cannot properly ask them to compel non-unionists to enter our Association.

THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS OF 1907.

There were 521 delegates present at the Congress, representing 1,700,000 members. So far as the number of members is concerned this is the highest record reached, and, except at the Newcastle Congress in 1891, there was never so large an assemblage of delegates. Mr. Gill, M.P., Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee, presided, and he conducted the proceedings with tact and good humour. By the kindness of Mr. Cairns, I have had the opportunity of reading a full report of the president's address. It is admirable in tone and spirit, and it reviews with ability and fairness the labour legislation of the present Government. The president spoke with warm appreciation of the earnestness and thoroughness with which labour questions have been handled by the Government. He recognised, too, that in connection with all questions specially affecting the interests of the workers there was the most cordial and entire co-operation by all the Labour members. This, indeed, is nothing new. The Labour members never at any time allowed differences of opinion, whether on politics or on social reform, to prevent them from working together for the advantage of labour, or for the general well-being of the community. . . . On the whole, the fortieth Congress seems to have been a great success. Beyond doubt the Congress wields a great and an increasing power, though on many topics it may be said to represent the aspirations, rather than the matured thoughts and settled convictions, of the workers. Circumstances make thorough discussion impossible. But when the Congress speaks with a unanimous voice, or with the voice of a great majority, it may fairly claim to speak for organised labour. As a stimulating, driving force for labour and progress, the Trades Union Congress is of immense and increasing value.

THE INTERNATIONAL MINERS' CONGRESS.

As we northern miners—Northumberland and Durham—took the first steps in the formation of the International Miners' Union, we are entitled to feel a sort of paternal interest in its progress. In spite of great difficulties—lingual, racial, and other—that progress has been marvellous. At the early Congresses Great Britain, Germany, France and Belgium were the only countries represented. More recently Austria, and, most important of all, the United States of America, now the greatest coal-producing country in the world, have sent delegates. Except Canada, and our far-off colonies, Australia and New Zealand, we have now all the chief mining countries of the world affiliated with the International Miners' Union. In the beginning, trade unionism was exceedingly weak in the continental countries. Of late years there has been a great accession of membership and of power. Wages, though still low, have largely increased; hours have been shortened, and other improvements have been effected. Our friends on the Continent frankly acknowledge that much of this is due to the action and example of the British miners. . . . Among the topics discussed was that of the attitude to be taken by the International Federation in the case of war breaking out. To this subject our newspapers rightly gave prominence. A general strike was advocated, and it was asserted

that this would make war impossible. The German delegates opposed action on these lines. Apart from this lack of unanimity, it may be doubted whether such a strike would be practicable, and whether any good result would be achieved by such methods. Judging by experience, it is found that the war spirit is quite as rampant and ungovernable among working men as among any other class. Our hope is rather in educational and moral means, in breaking down racial prejudices and animosities, in our becoming better acquainted with each other, in striving by every means to promote good feeling between man and man, and between one nation and another. In this way Societies like the International Miners' Federation certainly make for the world's peace and for general good fellowship.

ON JOINING THE MINERS' FEDERATION.

It has been supposed, and sometimes publicly stated—usually anonymously, and always by ill-informed writers—that the officials of your union have always been bitterly hostile to the Federation. No well-informed person, certainly no one who has attended our Council meetings, could reasonably entertain that delusion. Speaking for myself, I have always, as an ardent trade unionist, favoured combination on the widest possible basis. Of course it is essential to any effective union, of whatever kind, that there should be general identity of interest, as well as agreement on fundamental principles. In the early days of the Miners' Federation there were, as everybody knows, important differences of principle, of method, and of policy, which made our complete union with that body difficult, if not wholly impracticable. These points need not now be dwelt upon. Indeed, it is scarcely necessary to mention them. They are well known to all who have intelligently watched the respective associations. It may be confidently asserted that the personal feelings, or the individual opinions, of your officials had nothing whatever to do with the subject. There has never been other than harmony, good feeling, and readiness to work together in the general interest of the workers, between us and the leading men of the Miners' Federation. As regards other differences, arising from local usages, and the broader questions of principle, policy, and method, with time and free discussion some of the most pronounced of these have diminished, or entirely disappeared.

ARBITRATION AND CONCILIATION.

At a time when the railway employees are appealing for the recognition of their Association in negotiating with their employers, the Labour Department of the Board of Trade has opportunely issued a valuable Report on the rules of the "Voluntary Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Boards and Joint Committees in the United Kingdom." The document affords a capital object lesson in the present crisis. It is encouraging to find that a steadily increasing number of disputes are settled by arbitration and conciliation. But the number settled is small indeed compared with the number of disputes and strikes which are prevented by these Boards. More than one and a quarter million of workers have their industrial differences adjusted by Conciliation and Joint

Committee Boards. By far the greatest number of disputes settled by these methods falls to the mining and quarrying industries—nearly four-fifths of the total recorded belonging to this group. In our own county, and in Durham, the references are exceptionally large. The present Report gives much useful and interesting information bearing upon the constitution and methods of the work of the Boards. In his review of the many sets of regulations now in force in the various industries, Mr. Wilson Fox, the chief of the Labour Department, says that friendly discussion at joint meetings of boards and committees of the representatives of employers and employed has become a very generally "recognised method" of settling disputes—whether involving a stoppage of work or not—in most of the principal trades throughout the country.

"Thus, in the coal mining and iron and steel industries, wages—the most frequent cause of disputes—are in most districts controlled by conciliation boards or similar arrangements. In another large industry, the cotton trade, conciliation is provided for the spinning branch by the Brooklands Agreement, while the weaving branch has a joint committee with limited powers. In the engineering trades the terms of settlement made in January, 1898, of the dispute in 1897–8, provide conciliatory methods of arranging disputes for nearly the whole of the United Kingdom. In the shipbuilding trades, machinery is in existence at the important centres of this industry for avoiding a common cause of disputes, viz., the demarcation line of work between the various classes of trades employed. In the building trades conciliation boards were, up to 1905, of a local character only; but in that year a national scheme of conciliation was formed."

While the functions of conciliation boards vary considerably in detail, their value as a means of preventing stoppages of work is shown by the fact that in most cases the rules provide that there shall be no such suspension by either side until the matter at issue has been considered by the board. Some bodies, indeed, refuse to consider the dispute till work has been resumed. "Of the 7,248 cases settled by conciliation boards in the ten years 1896–1906, only ninety-two (or about 1 per cent.) were preceded by a stoppage of work. Most of the boards provide that all their decisions, or the awards of their arbitrators, &c., shall be final and binding, and a few boards go further, and impose a money penalty for breach of agreement or award." The number of boards and committees is given as 194, known to the Department; in addition there are two connected with co-operative societies, and fifteen district boards not confined to any particular trade.

ACCIDENTS IN MINES.

In 1906 there were 1,190 fatal accidents in or about mines and quarries, of which 1,098, causing 1,178 deaths, occurred at mines. The greater number of these fatalities, as usual, were due to falls of roof or sides—the death-rate from this cause being 77 per 100,000 of underground workers. While there has been for many years past a very considerable diminution in the number of fatal accidents from other causes, "falls of ground" go on from year to year without much, if any, decrease. The Report says that "the inspectors o.

mines are unanimously of opinion that accidents of this class are capable of reduction by greater attention to timbering by miners and officials." From explosions there has been a steady, continuous diminution in the death-rate of late years—due largely, I cannot but think, to the recognition of coal dust as a dangerous factor, and to consequent efforts, by removing dust and by watering, to deal with this source of danger. Last year the death-rate from explosions was but 7·6 per 100,000 persons employed—the lowest record for any year except 1897-8, 1900, and 1903-4. As showing the great improvement, it is worthy of notice that whereas during the five years ending 1855 the death-rate from this cause showed an average of 128 per 100,000, in the five years ending 1885 it had fallen to 41 per 100,000, and to 12 per 100,000 in the five years ending 1905. Taking the same quinquennial periods the death-rate from all classes of accidents, underground and on the surface, has fallen from an average of 430 per 100,000 in the five years ending 1855 to 201 in the five years ending 1885, and to 129 per 100,000 in the five years ending 1905. The decline has been greatest in explosions and in shaft accidents, which have fallen from 130 per 100,000 in 1851-5 to 12 per 100,000 in 1901-5.

THE MINES EIGHT HOURS BILL.

Whatever else may be said of such legislation as this, no one will deny its vast importance. It concerns not only employers and workmen, but the nation and the community as a whole. Whether looked at from the humanitarian or the economic standpoint, it is likely to be fraught with far-reaching results. But I have not here discussed, nor do I mean to discuss, the principle of the Bill. After the last general vote of our members I recognise that, as an Association, we have ceased to be opponents. That vote, indeed, was far from satisfactory as a decisive expression of the Northumberland miners' opinion. There were many abstentions from voting, and the majority was small; but there was a majority. Altogether, apart from the ballot then taken, it must be evident to everybody, whether employers or workmen, that the Bill has now entered into the region of practical politics. . . . In these circumstances, therefore, common sense and wisdom dictate to those immediately concerned that the subject should be boldly faced and carefully considered, so that the changes which are inevitable, and some of which may have far-reaching consequences, may be effected with as little friction, as little sacrifice and injury, as possible. Fortunately, there is ample time to discuss the subject, not only among ourselves, but in conference with miners elsewhere, and also with the employers, if this is thought desirable.

OLD AGE PENSIONS.

Critics from whom better things might have been expected have dealt somewhat ungraciously with Mr. Asquith's action. When it is remembered that others have been profuse in promises and have done nothing, we ought to welcome the conduct of a Chancellor of the Exchequer who made no electoral promises, but who is making a commencement in doing the right thing. . . .

After making every reasonable deduction, the total cost would be certainly very high. While it is expected that a beginning will be made next year, it would be unreasonable to suppose that the Chancellor of the Exchequer can at once launch a fully-equipped universal system. If an honest start be made on sound lines, that is all that can reasonably be asked for or anticipated.

COAL-MINING IN AMERICA.

When I visited America in 1883 I found the working hours excessive, seldom less for any class of workmen than twelve hours a day. This continued until within the last few years, when the miners became better organised. I am glad to learn that a uniform working day of eight hours has been generally established. Furthermore, laws for the protection of the lives and the limbs of the miners have been passed and are enforced, with the results that the mines in Illinois now compare favourably, as regards their average death-rate, not only with the other States of the American Union, but even with the mines of the United Kingdom.

II

IN THE TRANSVAAL

IN 1904 Mr. and Mrs. Burt went out to the Transvaal, where two of their sons had settled. There followed a little book entitled "A Visit to the Transvaal : Labour, Black, White, and Yellow." The manuscript was presented to the Northumberland Miners' Association. "In giving the manuscript," wrote Mr. Hugh Boyle, "Mr. Burt imposed no conditions ; but he expressed a wish that should any profit accrue from the sale it might be handed over to the fund being raised for the assistance of Mrs. Young, the widow of our late respected and much beloved secretary." The voyage was made in the *Dunluce Castle*, on the first of the trips of that vessel to South Africa. Mr. Burt wrote :—

When we left Southampton there were about 150 first-class passengers on board, most of whom were returning to South Africa after a short sojourn in England. Though many of them had been away from their native land for 30 or 40 years and had reared families in their adopted country, they invariably spoke of the old country as their home. Many of them were from Johannesburg, and they seemed to have secured a fair portion of the gold for which that part of the globe is noted. Amongst them were shareholders in gold and diamond mines, directors of companies, merchants, auctioneers—sharp, eager, intelligent, enterprising business men. Not a few of them were keen politicians, who approached me with a view to discuss the political situation, imperial and South African. Perhaps I fought shy of these encounters. Like the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" I am a sort of intellectual non-combatant. Before starting I had resolved to use my eyes and ears freely and to rest my tongue, so far as that was permissible. Settled questions, or such as are unalterable, I never care to discuss. Of politics—especially of party controversial politics—I had drunk my fill during the long session. It was soon apparent that the questions which my fellow-passengers were most eager to discuss were precisely those for which I had no particular taste. Many of them, so they told me, had been Liberals, originally ; they had been ardent admirers of Mr. Gladstone, but now their heroes were Cecil Rhodes, Lord

Milner, and Mr. Chamberlain. They warmly approved of the importation of Chinese labourers; already this had produced a most beneficent effect, and it would be the salvation of Johannesburg and of the Transvaal. The Liberal party had blundered in opposing the war which was inevitable, as well as just. When anything is inevitable it always seems to me needless to discuss its ethical merits. For the most part I listened in silence, except when frankness compelled me to tell them that I wholly dissented from their opinions, and, further, to make it apparent that their heroes were not mine.

A glance at the busy quay [at Capetown] sufficed to show that we were no longer in a white man's country. Scores and hundreds of Zulus—lithe, active, muscular men, lined the wharf, actively engaged in loading and unloading the ships. They lifted and trundled into the sheds and warehouses huge boxes of merchandise, doing their heavy work in the broiling sun with apparent ease and playfulness. Never had I seen workers play with hard work and enjoy it as did these Zulus. I was told by their foreman that they received about 4s. a day, and he said that white men could not compete with them in work of the kind.

The Kaapsche Hoop is nearly 6,000 feet above the sea, and the spectator sees mountains far off, which tower high above his standpoint. Spitz Kop, 60 miles away and 7,500 feet high, is easily seen on a clear day, while in other directions, apparently higher and still further off, are other great mountain ranges. To add to the beauty there is a variety of colouring, a bright greenness in the grass, trees, and shrubs all around, which I observed in few other parts of South Africa. From the cliffs close by is one of the most impressive natural pictures that I ever saw. Sheer down two or three thousand feet below lies a vast basin-like valley, with a diameter of some 25 miles, edged by lofty mountain ranges, one beyond another. On a bright day Barberton is plainly visible, the clear atmosphere making it difficult to believe that the place is so far away. "If you doubt the distance, walk it," was the curt advice when I expressed scepticism. The whole scene is awful, awe-inspiring. No sound, no motion, apparently a veritable valley of death. Here we seem to be—

At happy distance from earth's groaning field,
Where ruthless mortals wage incessant wars.

And yet one need not look far to see proofs of disturbance and turmoil. The yawning chasms on every hand, the great boulders tost aloft into such fantastic shapes, the abandoned fortress close by with its wreckage of corrugated iron and barbed wire strewn around—all bear evidence of nature's convulsions and of man's conflicts.

Apart from my own family there were but three men in all South Africa whom I knew. Before I had been many days in the Transvaal I was

fortunate enough to meet one of them—Sir Alfred Pease. Sir Alfred was then acting resident magistrate in the Barberton district. He is the son of the late Sir Joseph Pease, long and honourably known in the public life of England as member for a Durham constituency. Sir Alfred himself was member for the Cleveland division of Yorkshire for some few years. A universal favourite with British and Boer—no easy achievement here—I heard but one criticism of his magisterial action, but that criticism was general. “He is too lenient with the Kaffirs, but after he has been here a while longer he will be cured of that.” As Sir Alfred has tendered his resignation and is about to return to England, it becomes doubtful whether he will ever attain to the Transvaal standard of public duty in his treatment of the natives.

It is not the gold mines only, but the land and all the other industries that require Kaffir labour. Many natives, too, work on their own land; they are living well and contentedly, under healthier, safer, and altogether happier conditions than the gold mines offer them. From mere figures, therefore, it would be unsafe to assert anything positively, except that there is in South Africa a very large coloured population, which numerically preponderates immensely over the whites. On the whole, nearly all the persons with whom I talked, and they were many, agreed that there was for present needs and future developments a great shortage of unskilled labour in the mines. Some practical, competent men qualified that opinion by saying that, for present requirements, there was quite enough labour, but that for the opening out of new mines, and the development of the existing mines, the supply was certainly insufficient. But on one point there was practical unanimity, namely, that Kaffirs were obtainable, at one period in much greater numbers, but that they were deliberately kept back, or the recruiting was slackened, in order to establish a case for the importation of Chinese. Everybody I met away from the Rand, and many miners and other workmen there, held that view. Again and again I was told by persons whose veracity I could not doubt that from personal knowledge they could testify that Kaffirs were obtainable in large numbers, and this at the very time when the outcry in the Johannesburg press was loudest as to shortage of labour. This opinion came almost entirely from persons who were themselves strongly in favour of the importation of the Chinese.

How far is it practicable to supplement the shortage of Kaffir labour by the employment of white men? That white men can do the work is undeniable. That industrious, willing whites, anxious to work, and unable to find employment, are to be found in sad abundance is also beyond doubt. In every part of the United Kingdom they abound. In Capetown, in Kimberley, and in other parts of South Africa, the Johannesburg newspapers tell of meetings of unemployed whites, at which hungry men clamour for work and wages that they may feed their wives and children. In Johannesburg itself—around the gold mines—there are crowds of unemployed men, eager for work. No recruiting agent need go in search of them. Employers needing workers;

workers begging for leave to toil! How strange, how incongruous, how contradictory it all seems.

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To my mind it is clear that if anything like the energy and resource, the ingenuity and persistency, the profuse expenditure of money and thought, which the mining authorities have so unsparingly devoted to the bringing and training of yellow men, had been directed to the employment of whites, there would have been without detriment to the industry, many hundreds, probably many thousands, more white men engaged on the mines than there are to-day.

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By way of apologising for the notion that unskilled manual labour degrades the white man in South Africa, it has been said, I think by the present Colonial Secretary (Mr. Lyttelton) and others, that wherever white men are a minority surrounded by a large coloured population the same sentiment prevails. That may be; but I am not aware that any country where such a view is held has ever become a great white man's country, or has achieved a greatness of any kind. There is always, too, a heavy penalty to pay by the whites themselves, where such notions prevail. Scores and hundreds of white men are paying that penalty now in South Africa. There, as elsewhere, the terrible tragedy of the unemployed is being enacted, and it appears there in the most aggravated form. It is hard enough anywhere for a man who is able and willing to work to be unable to obtain employment, it is doubly hard when he is stranded in a distant land; but when he has the offer of work, probably at a very low wage, it is cruel for him to feel that he cannot accept it without degrading himself in the eyes of his fellow-men.

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The favourite argument for the importation of Chinese labour is that it gives a great impetus to the employment of white men. I call it an argument, for there seems to be a sort of reasoning process involved. So far as I can make out, the argument runs thus:—"The great requirement is white population," says Mr. L. Phillips; "the way to increase 'whites' is to bring crowds of 'yellows.' The bringing of 'yellows' has already enormously increased the 'whites.'" . . . It is clear that, so far as white workmen are concerned, there was a much greater increase, positive and relative, before the coming of the Chinese than there has ever been since. Manifestly the proportion of white to coloured workers in the mines is steadily and continuously diminishing, whatever may be the fluctuation in the actual numbers employed from month to month.

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"A judicious man," says Carlyle, "looks at statistics not to get knowledge, but to save himself from having ignorance foisted upon him." Mr. Carrol Wright—a gentleman who probably has had as much to do with figures, and who knows as well how to use them, as any living man—quoting the saying that "figures do not lie" added—"true, but liars sometimes figure." I do

not suggest, nor do I think, that there has been wilful misrepresentation in the case with which I am dealing. But I do think there has been carelessness and ignorance accompanied by a certain presumption of ignorance and inattention on the part of those before whom the figures are laid.

I had now seen the Chinamen at work and at play. I had seen them feeding and in their sleeping quarters. Some of them I had seen lame, or ailing, waiting to be examined by the doctors, others sick or injured in the hospital—always a melancholy picture. The majority of them were of good physique, active and strong. The dining-rooms, dormitories, wash-houses, were all on a large scale, clean, orderly, well ventilated, and well arranged. Of wholesome, nutritious food there was ample supply. So far as these and other important points essential to physical health and convenience are concerned there was, so far as I could see, no room for complaint or criticism. . . . All that I have said, and more, may be frankly recognised without implying approval either of the methods by which the Chinamen have been brought to the Rand, or of the conditions under which they live and work there. These conditions are in my view entirely inconsistent with the dignity, freedom, and independence of labour as understood by British working men and by the British people.

Mr. Chun roundly asserts that the coolies were brought to the Transvaal under the most cruel false pretences. On two important points they specially complain that they were deceived either by direct misrepresentation, or by the truth having been withheld from them. Scarcely any of them were aware, he says, that they had to work underground, nor had they any conception of the exceedingly small purchasing power of money in the Transvaal. Mr. Chun further stated that he had often "heard the coolies say that if they had known that they were to go underground and do the drilling, &c., they would not have come, even if they had been offered 4s. a day. The average wages paid to these coolies was about 40s. for 30 shifts. After buying milk, sugar, tobacco, and other things which they required, there was little or nothing left to send to their families in China."

I have met only one or two men in South Africa who do not seem to think that the essential difference between slavery and freedom lies in material comforts. Is a person well-fed, moderately sheltered, paid something for his labour, unwhipped, or whipped in moderation, has he a few acres of space in which he can roam about when he is not working or sleeping? Then under these conditions, if he is of another race and colour, he cannot reasonably complain, and he is in no proper sense of the word a slave! With those who hold this view, I cannot argue. I must rest content with expressing my own opinion that a person may be sumptuously fed and comfortably housed and yet he may not necessarily be a free man.

On one point I am clear ; the Imperial Government should have stoutly and resolutely declined to sanction the Ordinance until responsible Government is firmly established in the Transvaal. If, after being fully equipped with self-government, such a measure were passed, lovers of liberty might grieve that some of our noblest traditions had been abandoned, or besmirched, but then the stigma of active participation in the disgrace would not have attached to us.

III

OLD COLLEAGUES

IN March, 1907, died Hugh Boyle, the President of the Northumberland Miners' Association, in his fifty-sixth year. He was buried at Newcastle, amid strong and remarkable manifestations of public respect. Speaking at the graveside, Mr. Burt made reference to some other old associates, in an address which is given here in full, as a fine and touching example of elegiac oratory :—

As the oldest official of the Northumberland Miners' Union, having had a tenure of office of more than forty years, the committee have asked me to say a few words in appreciation of Mr. Boyle's services and character. To do justice to that theme would require more time than is at our disposal, and more strength and greater eloquence than I possess. He was my friend—faithful, affectionate, just. He was the friend of many of you around this open grave ; he was, indeed, the friend of all. I knew him for thirty years, and intimately for twenty-five years. We all mourn his untimely death. But when we think of that desolate home, of the brave woman who has been widowed, and of the sons and daughter who have been orphaned, it seems an impertinence to speak of one's private sorrow. All our hearts, I am sure, go out in deep sympathy to Mrs. Boyle and her sons and daughter in their severe bereavement. The loss to them is an irreparable loss. Mr. Boyle loved his home, he was an affectionate and model husband and father, and all we can do is to express our sympathy with Mrs. Boyle and the family. But I think we are entitled to take a wider view. Mr. Boyle's death is a public loss, a loss to the public life of this locality ; and your presence here in such large numbers, and representing such a diversity of opinion and of interest, bears testimony to that fact. You will pardon me if I refer in a few words to the great loss that the miners of Northumberland and the members of our Association have sustained in the removal of our friend and comrade. Mr. Boyle nearly thirty years ago was elected by the Seghill men to represent them at our Council meetings. A few years after that he was appointed a member of our chief committees, and during all these years he has given his time, his energy, and his talents to the elevation and the welfare of the miners of Northumberland.

Eleven years ago he was elected as President of the Northumberland Miners'

Association as the successor of that true, brave man, John Nixon. For nearly thirty years death had made no break in the ranks of the chief agents of the Miners' Association—a somewhat remarkable record, we may say. Then Mr. Nixon was taken—ripe in years and in experience. Two years ago, our dear friend and colleague Ralph Young was followed to his grave; and Mr. Nixon and Mr. Young lie close by the grave in which we have just deposited the remains of Mr. Boyle. Now, all these men were men of sterling worth, men of character and of great ability. They reflected credit upon the working miners of Northumberland, and would have reflected credit upon any section of men in the world. That is a testimony of which the miners of Northumberland may be legitimately proud; but, if I may say so, I think they have also reason to be proud of that unerring instinct, or shall we call it that sagacity and judgment, which enables them to select good men to occupy positions of trust and responsibility. And what more shall we say of our friend Mr. Boyle? We cannot do justice to his merits, and, standing by the side of his grave, flattery would be unbecoming. It is unbecoming anywhere. But I think we may say that Mr. Boyle was in many respects an ideal leader of working men. He had the first and most essential element in the case of any public man—high character. And he had a knowledge which enabled him not only to deal with general principles, but with all the necessary details connected with the life of the miner and with the affairs of our Association. From trapper-boy to coal-hewer, he had gone through all the phases of the miner's life, and his sympathy with the worker was never forgotten, and never abated to the end of his life.

Above all, he had courage; and perhaps there is hardly anything which tests a man whom working men honour with their confidence more than to have to speak up against them—to have to take up an unpopular line; but Mr. Boyle had the courage to tell the men when he thought they were wrong, though he always told it with sympathy, with kindness, and with consideration. His appeal was always to reason—never to passion or prejudice. His essential characteristic was manliness. But it was not only the masculine strength of the man; it was not only his indomitable will; it was not only his unflinching courage—he had also, combined with these qualities, that gentleness which, as Tennyson says, “when it weds with manhood makes a man.” The thing that struck me most in connection with Mr. Boyle was, I think, his amazing self-control under the most trying circumstances. That is a great quality, and it was all the more striking in Mr. Boyle because he was a man of acute sensitiveness of nature; he was a man of strong emotions. It is no great merit in the case of some men to exercise self-control, because they seem to be so wanting in sensitiveness and so apathetic that there is hardly anything that needs to be controlled. Mr. Boyle was a man of strong feelings, and under the most trying conditions he was self-possessed. Often in times of stress and difficulty he has reminded me of that noble eulogy by Hamlet on Horatio. Nearly the whole of that fine passage may be applied to Mr. Boyle:—

A man that fortunes's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger

To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of hearts,
As I do thee.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, we cannot by thought add an inch to our stature, either physically or mentally, but we may to some extent discipline and control our temper and keep it in subjection to the intellect. I have spoken of Mr. Boyle—and I am sure you will pardon me—mainly in connection with the miners. But there was nothing narrow, or sectional, or petty in Mr. Boyle's nature. He was a big man in every sense—tall in stature, lofty in mind, large in heart—a truly magnanimous man. We are assembled here, men of very diverse views, belonging to many parties, believing in different creeds—and perhaps in none. But we have all met to do honour to Mr. Boyle's memory. There is one thing in which we all agree. The living and the dead are around us here—we are all mortal, we are all journeying on the same road—to the grave. Whether the journey's end is near or far—it cannot be far, but whether it is very near or a little more distant we know not; it is wisely hidden from us. I said “the end of the journey.” Will it be the end of it all? We know not; to again quote Tennyson—

We have but faith; we cannot know

—and if it be frankly spoken, some of us have little enough faith. But there is one thing in which we cannot be wrong. Let us be true to each other; let us cling to each other; let us act well our part as our departed friend acted well his part. As we leave him we may fittingly repeat to ourselves Bryant's lines:—

So live that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go, not like the quarry slave at night
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

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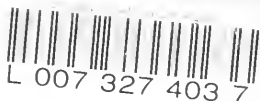
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